Arminius the Liberator of Germania

Hermann the Cheruscan and the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest

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Chapter 1: Blood at Dawn

The morning tastes like a knife that's been in the blood for too long. I wake up because my skull is pounding like a war drum and the fog fills my nose, cold, damp, and resentful. The furs around me are wet with breath, with sweat, with what went wrong last night when one of us tried to hold the other to the embers for fun. Half a shield under my back, a complete hangover in my head. I straighten up, slowly, as if there's a wedge stuck somewhere in my spine. A fire is smoldering. It wheezes like an old man. I spit into it, and a reply hisses at me. "Good morning, you ugly world," I say, "today you'll see something." The trees stand black like the pillars of a temple, except our gods don't need temples—they need courage, mead, and people who don't run from mud. Not me. I'm running nowhere but forward.

The camp lies scattered like a quarrel no one cared to clean up. Furs, shields, bones. Men who look as if the forest itself had spat them out. There's Bear, whose hands look as if he'd used them to learn trees. There's Hrodgar, whose laugh is so loud you'd think he could smother an enemy. And there's Thumelicus, my snorer from yesterday, his nose pointing the wrong way—a clay monument on an oak head. Above it all, the smell: cold smoke, old wool, metal eager for a body. I rub my tongue against my teeth. It's furry like an old wolf's. Yesterday's mead has claws. It also has wings: something somewhere between courage and madness flutters inside me. As long as it flies, I'm alive.

I know what's coming. It's always the same when men sit together too long: First they drink, then they boast, then they fight, then they make up, then they fight side by side against someone they don't know but surely hate. Today they are Romans. They smell of oil and conceit, and I know both of them. I've worn their armor. I know their tents, where the air tastes of leather and lies. I know the look in their eyes when they decide whether you die for them or later. I've counted their coins, I've drunk their orders like bitter medicine. All of this has given me muscles—and scars on my head. Today I pay back. Not with coins. With what weighs more.

Bear sits by the fire, chewing on a morsel that looks like a decision. "Brain," he grumbles, without looking up. "From whom?" I ask. He shrugs. "From someone who no longer needs it." I nod. We're practical people. He hands me a sip from the tankard. I take it. The mead burns like a memory that won't go away. "Today," I say, "the forest will breathe more tightly." Bear looks into the fog. "The forest doesn't breathe at all. It stops. Until someone screams." He's right. The fog hangs still, as if someone has cursed the world. I like that. A quiet morning is an honest morning: everything hears what you do.

Hrodgar appears, a grin on his face, an axe at his shoulder. "Arminius," he barks, "did you sleep well?" "Like a stone in a stream," I say, "always on the verge of drowning." He laughs, coughs, spits into the fire. "I dreamed that Varus called for help and no one understood him because his mouth was full of dirt." "A good dream," I say. "Keep it. Dreams are prophecies if you're brave enough to fulfill them." Hrodgar nods, and his grin narrows. "I want to see the man who forgets our names," he says. "He'll do it with missing teeth." We say things like that so fear knows where to sit—far away from us. It sits next to us anyway, sometimes giggles, scratches our necks. We drink it down.

The boys stand up. They look like knives, freshly sharpened, but still without notches. One ties the leather strap so tightly that the blood turns his hands pink. One kisses his mother's talisman as if it were a soft mouth promising him that everything will be alright. Nothing will be alright. It just becomes necessary. I walk past them, touching shoulders the way one calms horses. "You'll get dirty, boys," I say. "Dirt is the color of truth." One nods too eagerly, and I want to cut off his zealous tongue. But today everyone should learn their own lesson. I've already finished my share.

I examine my sword. Roman craftsmanship. Hard, succinct, without frills. It's a lie that only the wild is beautiful. Sometimes the austere is sharper. I guide the blade through the light. A thin strip of day clings to it. Good. The spear lies beside it, ashy in the handle, the tip hungry. The axe: It doesn't demand elegance, it only opens doors where bones once stood. I smell iron. It smells as if it's smiling. I smile back. "Today you make words," I say to the blade. "I translate."

At the edge of the camp, the trees stand like judges. Between them, paths that aren't paths at all. We know them. Every step has a story. Where the ground gives way, someone once sank up to his hipbone. His name was Eivind, and we pulled him out by his beard. He laughed as if he'd been reborn. Three days later, he died of a splinter in his foot. That's how it is: what saves you one moment will catch up with you later. I place my hand on the bark of a beech tree. It is as cold as the belly of a fish. "Stick to me, old friend," I say. "I'll bring you many faces today." The tree is silent. Nature takes. Nature rarely gives back what you expect.

We eat what's left. Tough meat, black around the edges, pink inside like shame still laughing. Bread that's more of a blow than a meal. Mead that clings to the throat. A dog sneaks between feet, steals a bone no one wanted anymore, and with that, looks as if he's won the war. I envy him briefly. Then I think: dogs die too. Only less often with a name. I'm going to make a few names today. Some

will be mine, some others'. Names are like wounds: the best ones are borne by those who survive.

Flashback is not a luxury, it is a bite that wakes you up. I see a Roman camp, straight as a curse. I hear Latin eating away at my ear. I see Varus, his face smooth as a freshly washed bone, his voice demanding obedience from us as if he were a deity with shoes. I bow in memory—and now straighten myself. "You wanted order," I murmur. "Here is ours." Our order is crooked, loud, muddy, but it holds when it counts. We feel at home in chaos. They never understand that. They think chaos is the end. For us, it is the beginning, where one breathes.

The fog moves as if it were a large animal turning its flank. Out of the silence grows a sound, distant yet unmistakable: marching footsteps. Metal on leather, leather on earth. A rhythm that doesn't ask if it's welcome. The young stop talking. The old stop pretending not to hear. I raise my hand, and the camp becomes a hand's breadth quieter. Bear stands beside me, slinging his axe over his shoulder. "First for me," he growls. "First for you," I say. "Second for Hrodgar, third for the gods, fourth for anyone still standing." We share the morning bread of violence. There's enough for everyone. More than enough—always.

I don't like speaking in front of crowds, but some sentences need to be thrown into the air to become arrows. "Listen," I say, "the gods are drinking this morning. Whoever doesn't hold the jug for them gets the blade. We're not a pretty bunch, but we're the right bunch. The Romans believe the forest is a road with leaves. It's a belly with teeth. We are the tongue within." A few laugh, a few spit, a few nod, as if writing it down on a list. "If you're afraid," I say, "then carry it like a torch. He who burns in the dark sees better." I raise my sword, as briefly as possible. No grand oath, just a reminder: metal speaks when words fail.

Thumelicus comes to me, his broken nose red like a god's mark. "Arminius," he says, "tell me I'll survive." I look at him. He reeks of fear, but also of intent. "You'll survive," I say, "if you do just one thing today: don't die." He blinks, as if it's a secret, and nods too hard. "And if I die?" he asks. "Then you won't die quietly," I say. "Loudness helps against forgetting." He laughs uncertainly. I pat him on the shoulder. I know how that is. Before the first battle, you're a two-bottomed barrel: courage at the bottom, doubt at the top. Shaking helps. Today, the forest itself shakes us.

We paint ourselves, not for beauty, but so that the faces know what they are. Coal, ash, a bit of yesterday's blood. I draw a line across my forehead, a second across my cheek. A cross? No. A flash of lightning. I want them to think the sky is cutting. Hrodgar paints circles around his eyes, looking like an owl that decided to eat meat. Bear dips his fingertips in ash, taps them on his chest—five dots like five promises. We're finished when the sun finally dares to compare the fog. It loses.

The dog barks for the third time. Not like just now, but short, harsh, as if barking a number. Three. I understand. Three times means now. The marching footsteps are close enough to taste—an iron flavor on the tongue of the morning. I turn to the camp, to my men, to the men who today will either become stories or grass. "Time," I say. No big words. Just the right ones. I take the last sip from the mug, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and spit. "Today we'll ruin those bastards' morning." The forest opens its mouth. We go inside.

The path we take is no path at all. It is a series of decisions made by others before us: left here, duck there, along the bark there, because bark is quieter than leaves. The men disappear behind trunks, reappear, become trunks. I hear the breath of twenty. I hear my own heart beating, not fast, not slow, just alert. I know the place near Detmold, where the slope breaks the footsteps and the water carries the sound. We spread out where the forest wants to finish a sentence. I sit down in the hollow I like: it takes me without consuming me. Before me is a swathe, narrow as a promise. There they will march, upright, orderly, like the thoughts of a man who has never loved.

Memories come like wolves when you sit still for too long. Rome again. An officer whose hand always smelled of oil—not because he tended his weapons, but because he never sweated. A table on which maps lay like lies with lines. "Here," he said, "here are the Germanic tribes. Forest. Swamps. Disorder." He smiled. "We make paths." Back then I thought: Go ahead and make them, but the paths don't belong to you as long as the forest doesn't love them. Today I show them how much the forest loves us. It loves us like its thorns: It lets us grow where it hurts.

Sounds become things: a metallic clack is a belt buckle, a dull thud is a boot sinking into the wet ground, a throaty shout is a command that needs to be translated. I still understand their words, even though I'd rather forget them. "Keep your distance." "Keep your pace." "Keep your eyes open." They hold so many things until someone holds what they don't want. I count without

keeping track: vanguard, main body, rearguard. In between are the animals they let go, believing that you can pacify meat with order. We'll see.

A young spearman next to me whispers a prayer that sounds like he's apologizing. "Be louder," I whisper back, "or shut up." He nods, pressing his lips together. His breath smells of bad milk and lack of sleep. I briefly place my hand on the back of his neck. He won't run. He's not one of those who run before the arrows fly. Some do. I don't judge, I just remember faces. Those who run may come back later, but only if they bring something with them: shame, anger, or a head. Preferably all three.

The first Roman heads emerge from the clearing, helmets gleaming as if the sky had suddenly become rich. Standards are raised, gold that sees its last light today. I smile. Gold dies badly, but it dies. "Not yet," I whisper, although no one is early. Patience is a knife that doesn't blunt if briefly sheathed. I wait until the belly of the column stretches, until it reaches the point where the slope forces it to the right and the swamp keeps it to the left. There are places where a step means more than a sword. This is one of them.

Hrodgar is somewhere to the left. I feel his grin like a lantern under a blanket. Bear is on the right, heavy, calm, a rock with hands. I'm in the middle, not because I'm important, but because that's where I can hear best when something goes wrong. Something always goes wrong. Planning is like drinking: you think you've got the crowd under control, until you realize you're standing on the table. I check the wind. It's coming toward us, carrying away our scent, bringing theirs to us: oil, leather, horse, fear so well hidden it smells like courage. I know the trick.

A bird screams. Not the dog, not the wind. A bird we've trained as only something that wants to be free can be trained: with food it loves. Three screams, short ones. Our signal. The world stops. I raise the spear. Not a great swing—an impulse, like waking someone you care about. The spear flies, and in the second before it hits, everything is beautiful: the line, the shadow, the breath stilling. Then it hits. A Roman falls like a pillar that realizes it's just wood after all. Time starts again.

Noise. But the right kind. Not the noise of a market, not the chatter of a gathering. The noise of metal questioning flesh. Arrows that become letters and write sentences on backs, shoulders, and eyes. Screams that rip someone's name from their throat. I push forward, not fast, not slow—just so I know my weight. The sword in my hand is suddenly as light as a feather, as if it had

decided to dance today. I am not a dancer. I am the one who decides when the music stops.

The first man before me has a face a sculptor would love, if he liked statues that die. I don't strike the face. I strike the gap between helmet and neck, the narrow tunnel where truth dwells. The sword goes in like an honest word. Warmth comes out. He looks surprised, as if someone had lied to him. I take his shield before he falls. Shields fall in love quickly with new hands. I hold two truths now. It gets easier.

To the left, I hear Hrodgar laughing. That calms me. To the right, I don't hear Bär. That calms me more. For some men, silence kills. The Romans try to organize themselves. It's touching, like children tidying up the house while it burns. A centurion yells something about the front and the line. I yell back, without words, just a sound that says: There is no front here, there is only proximity. Proximity wins. I push, shove, kick, cut. The forest does the rest: roots hold feet, branches beat helmets, the ground steals footing. A good ally who promises nothing.

A horse rears, wild, white-eyed, kicking a man out of his line. I grasp the mane, draw close, and speak into its ear as if it were a friend who's had too much to drink. The animal calms down, or I imagine it does. I give it my heel, and it understands what I want: forward pressure, weight against disorder that isn't ours. I won't ride, not today. Today, everything is at the height of my knees. Where mud, blood, and determination meet, I am at home. I let the horse go. It makes a decision that isn't mine.

Between two trunks I see the standard, gold, and an eagle pretending to fly. It doesn't fly. It hangs on a piece of wood like a lie on a beautiful mouth. I point, call Hrodgar, who understands without question. We go together, like two men following a free beer. In front of us is a knot of shields. I press, Hrodgar saws through the edge with his axe, where the fingers are. Fingers don't scream, but the men behind do. The knot softens. The standard wavers. The gold loses its desire. I grab it, yank it. It comes. It is lighter than I expected. Light things fall faster.

Behind us, men howl, in front, men fall; everywhere, someone is deciding what they want to be: dust or stone. I am stone, today, now, in this minute so clear that even lies take their hats off. I throw the standard to Bear. He catches it without looking, throws it into the mud, and tramples it down as if planting a tree. "It won't grow," he says. I nod. "It shouldn't." We sow something else: fear that takes root in hearts that thought they were made of marble.

A young Roman falls at my feet. He's holding his sword incorrectly, as if it were a question he doesn't understand. He's handsome; he could have been sitting in a villa where someone is playing the lyre. Now the forest is playing. I nudge him with my shield, not hard, just honestly. He stumbles, looks at me, and in his eyes is a plea I recognize. I was him, once, somewhere, just not here. I spare him nothing. Mercy is a garment that doesn't fit today. I send him over, quickly. Some things are done quickly, out of respect.

The column breaks. Not all at once, but like ice that already has cracks: piece by piece. The rearguard wants to go forward, the vanguard wants to retreat, and in the middle, someone is crying out for his mother, meaning Rome. I give a signal, and our arrows speak again. The sky fills with brief answers. I think of the women by the fire, of the jugs that will be empty tonight, and of the stories we'll tell while trying not to grin too much. Some will be missed. We raise our cups for them. We always do. We do it honestly.

I'm not looking for Varus. Not yet. Big fish come when the water is calm. Now it's a cauldron. I want him to notice for himself how many fingers are missing before he realizes they're his. I move along the edge, where order cries out and disorder sings. Someone calls my name, not like a prayer, more like a curse that needs hope. I answer with a blow that takes his opponent from his body. "Thanks," he says. "Drink me a drink later," I say. "Later" is a word that often lies in war. I use it anyway. It keeps men alive until the arrow comes that knows no later.

The fog tears open as if a hand had insulted it. Light falls slantingly, giving everything a color seen only on days of battle—a yellow that is ashamed, a red that rejoices. I see one of our own stumble because a root tells him the truth. I pull him up, push him into a gap he can fill. War is a barrel into which someone is constantly throwing new arrows. You're good when you see the gaps before you feel them. Today I see a lot. Maybe because I drank enough yesterday. Maybe because I can die today, and that gives me a freedom known only to those who mean it.

The screaming grows deeper, the fighting shorter. Men aren't streams; they're puddles when it's over. I wipe the blade on a dead man's cloak. He doesn't need it anymore. A pair of crows perch on a branch as if they've paid an entrance fee. "Wait," I say, "your breakfast's coming soon." The birds look wise. Birds are wiser than men on days like this. They don't argue about reasons. They argue about leftovers. That's sensible. Reasons are expensive, leftovers are safe.

I pause. Just for a breath. I hear the forest breathing again. It does so slowly, full, contentedly, as after a feast. We're not finished yet, but we're right. I wipe the sweat from my eyes, salty like the sea I once saw, when I still believed the world was a wheel that could be turned if you just gripped it tightly enough. The world is not a wheel. It's a knife. Today we hold it. Tomorrow, perhaps someone else will. But this morning belongs to us. I raise the sword, pointing forward, and my voice is calm, as if I've just slept in. "Forward."

We press deeper into the forest, to where the slope narrows and the trunks stand like ribs. I go first, not because I'm braver, but because I like the sounds only the first one hears: the delicate tearing of spider webs against the face, the soft wailing of leaves under weight, the click of a branch that decides not to break. Behind me, Bear breathes like a forge. Hrodgar speaks with his axe, a song of metal and intent. We are three bars into a song that knows no pause. In front of us—still Romans, but less pride, more sweat. Good. Sweat makes people. Pride makes figures. Figures fall more beautifully. People fall harder.

An officer with a red plume rushes out of the line that is no longer a line. He raises his sword, shouts something about "steadfast" and "honor." I give him both, in a way he didn't want. Steadfast—my shield in his chest. Honor—my knife in the gap everyone has. His blood is warm, his gaze is surprised, his mouth forms a word that is neither God nor mother. I hold him briefly, lower him slowly to the ground, not out of kindness, but so he doesn't clatter too loudly. Loudness attracts arrows. I like arrows, but not in me.

A small space opens up between the trunks, little more than a clearing for a story. We fill it with our own. Half a dozen Romans remain, stubborn as woodlice. They cling to shields, to rules, to what they were taught when the world is as straight as possible. I walk diagonally, not head-on. Head-on is art, diagonal is craftsmanship. I am a craftsman today, with gleaming tools. One hits the edge of my shield, the vibration runs down my arm. I smile. "Are you still alive?" I ask my arm. It answers with strength. Good. We both still are.

As the square grows quieter, the wind picks up, bringing the scent of the water from the slope. It smells of moorland, of old leaves, of a long wait. I think of the evenings by the fire when the old men say, "The Teutoburg Forest has teeth." They smile as if they were theirs. Today they are ours. I wipe the blade, push the spear with my foot to one of the boys. "Take it." He nods, as if I've given him an inheritance. I have. An inheritance that's only good if you spend it.

The sounds of battle shift like the weather. Before, everything was to the left, then everywhere, now down in the hollow. We follow, but not like dogs

smelling a scent, but like men who know that scent lies. I send two ahead, light and quiet. They disappear as if the trees were hungry. I wait, counting heartbeats, until they reappear, finger signals: arrows, shield wall, choke point. Good. Narrow points are cups. You pour in what you have and hope the cup overflows—on the wrong side. I stand at the edge, where chance is smaller. Today I want to keep it small, so small that it slips through my fingers.

"Arminius," says Hrodgar, "if we survive this, I'll drink for a whole summer." "Then you'll need a long summer," I say. He grins. "I'll take a long one." Bear looks at us as if we were two boys by a river. "Talk later," he growls. "Now do it." I nod. He's right. Talking is good when the throat is free. Today it is free enough for orders and curses. I give both. The men move as if they had practiced dying together in a life before this one. Perhaps they have.

We clash again. I feel nothing and everything. The blade finds paths I don't consciously choose. My body knows what my head would otherwise ruin. One blow, one step, one breath, one look. I don't count, I collect. Faces, movements, the spot on a man's neck where a drop of sweat lingers longer than it should. I am attentive as a thief. I steal lives, and I steal them as quietly as possible. Not out of mercy. Out of economy. Noise costs energy.

Someone roars "Varus!", but it's not a shout, it's a wish. Wishes are precious and out of place here. I wave my hand dismissively. "Not now," I say to no one. "He'll come when he falls." Great men fall louder than they walk. It takes time. I give it to him. The forest doesn't. The forest is impatient today. It wants this song to change verses soon. So do I, but I know that the best music needs its pauses. We take one, short, kneeling behind trunk and shield, and our breath suddenly tastes of iron blossom.

I hear the boys again, this time they laugh crookedly because they realize they're still there. Laughter is allowed, as long as it's short. I grant them that. Then I hear the crow call we didn't order. It comes from the west, harsh, three times. Another sign. Not ours. The forest full of languages. I tense up. "Attention," I say, "the world still has surprises in store." Bear nods, tightens his axe. Hrodgar spits, says, "Well then." We're ready, as ready as one can be when the air still trembles with arrows that have just passed by.

But the surprise remains small. A troop of Romans, scattered, attempts to plant a new line. Poor ground. I go there, speak again with edge and blade. One can grow tired of killing, but not today. Today, tiredness is a luxury we can afford tomorrow. I cut, I push, I shove, I pull. The movements are prayers, only without God. In the end, what was just standing lies there, and I am still there,

what I value. Life is a knife that you sharpen against your own throat. I hold still. It remains sharp.

The fog begins to clear. Not because the sun is stronger, but because the noise is tearing it apart. I step back, look down the slope. There lie what they later call stories, and they are not pretty, but they are honest. I raise my sword, nod to Hrodgar, nod to Bear. "We are not finished yet," I say. "We are never finished," says Bear. "Until the last man has no mouth left." "Or no reason," says Hrodgar. "Reasons rarely run out," I say. We agree. This is rare. Rarity feels like luck. I don't trust luck. It wears soft soles and a hard end.

I think of tonight, briefly, so briefly it's like a blink. Fire, smoke, mead. Names we say, and others we no longer say. I think of the women who will look at us as if we had hung the sky around our necks. We only moved trees. But sometimes that's enough. Then I block it out. The future is music from another tent. I hear only this now: the scraping, the clinking, the huffs, the short "A" of a man losing his breath. I breathe for two, for three, for myself. I breathe until the morning no longer bleeds, but only sweats.

"Arminius," says Bär, "you wanted order? There it is." He points to the Romans lying still, in lines that are no longer lines. "I wanted justice," I say. "Order is just the sound justice makes when it walks through the forest." He doesn't understand, or he pretends not. I don't care. Words are stones, and today we'd rather throw others. I put the sword back on my belt, draw the spear, and adjust the shield. "Onward," I say, "until the wind smells of us and not of them." The wind changes. He has understood.

We go deeper, and the forest becomes vast once more, so vast that even I feel small. Good. Being small before something that loves you—that doesn't make you weaker. It makes you sharper. I count inside, not outside. Nor breath, nor blood, nor footsteps, nor will. Everything is there. I hear the marching cadence again, but it's uneven, stumbling, as if someone had dropped the drum. I smile. No song lasts forever if the baton breaks. Mine is firm in my hand. I raise it. The second act begins.

Chapter 2: Childhood between mud, sweat and roast pork

I wasn't born; I was ripped out like a wedge of wood from an old tree trunk. The hut was a belly of smoke and clay, with the fire inside it, which didn't warm, only made the soot dance. My mother knelt on a hide that had

experienced much—too much to still be soft—and clenched her teeth so hard, as if she wanted to break the world in her jaw. The midwife had hands like roots: cracked, gnarled, with fine black dirt in the cracks, as if her fingers had learned to hold everything except mercy.

The ground was cold. Cold clay sucks the courage from your feet and collects it beneath your toes like a memory you'll need later. The smoke hung low, and in between the scents was the smell of wet fur, of human and animal, of fat that dripped and solidified. In the corner, something grunted that had been our pig for months and that suddenly one night looked as if it were our god. Perhaps it was, because when it screamed, everyone stood up. When it was quiet, we ate. And when it died, we would preserve it in salt and stories, like everything else we held dear.

My first cry wasn't a cry for milk. It was a curse, without words. The midwife lifted me by the leg, as if checking if anything else would fall out. "He can cry," she said, and my mother laughed without joy. "Then he'll fit in here." She rubbed my back with a bundle of wool that smelled of old smoke. Wool sands you into life, harder than any tongue.

The walls were made of boards and gaps, and the wind rattled through them like a thief who can't find something. I couldn't see anything through the cracks—I was blind from the start—but I heard wood cracking outside and a dog fighting somewhere in the village, as serious as if it were about the moon. A bundle of dried herbs hung above me. They cast their shadows across my face, as if they had something against me.

My father wasn't there when I arrived. He was there when the tankard came. Then he was there when the next tankard came. Men like him are punctual when it comes to drinking and unpunctual when it comes to everything else. When he stumbled into the hut in the morning, he smelled of mead, of old quarrels, and of the frosty breath with which he had spent the night. He looked at me, looked past me, looked back at me, as if I were a question with too many answers. "Boy?" he asked, without anyone answering him. "Boy," my mother said, and I was.

He knelt, as far as a man can kneel, whose knees have more scars than skin, and placed two fingers on my forehead. His fingers were hard and warm, his nails black from the life we live when no one is looking. "Breathe," he grumbled, as if he'd just bought a horse. "He should breathe if he wants to stay here." Then he looked at the pig, the pig looked back, and for a moment there was silence, as if even the fire were listening.

We didn't have a crib. We had a rough board with two empty salt sacks on it. My mother laid me down, and the sacks smelled of meat that had long since disappeared, yet remained. On the board, the world shook less, and I closed my eyes, as one does when one makes an agreement with the world: Today I stay, tomorrow we'll see what happens next.

By midday, the sun was somewhere behind a gray cloth, pretending it didn't exist. It wasn't brighter in the hut, just a different kind of darkness. I heard voices coming from outside: children screaming because they were alive; men speaking in lower tones, as if they had something to hide; women laughing as if they knew that laughter and tears share the same groove. The midwife murmured something that sounded like magic and smelled like washing up. She tied a thread around my wrist—red, so the spirits would know—and spat three times on the ground, because spit was as valuable here as incense was in the stories we heard about others.

Later—the air had become heavier, you could feel the smoke making your back squirm when no one opened the door—my father came with a piece of meat that looked as if it had been struggling for a long time. He held it over the fire until the fat sizzled, and the sound made me flinch. Many years later, I would flinch again when fat sizzled, not from fear, but from hunger. Hunger is more honest than fear.

"His name?" asked the midwife, as if she didn't already have three names in her pocket. Names are like knives here: There are many, but the right ones are rare. My mother named two, three—names that reeked of grandfathers and old stories no one remembered for sure anymore. My father said, "His name is what he calls himself." A sentence that said nothing and meant everything. I would use it often later to get out of things for which I had no word.

The first night was long. Nights are longer when you're new. The wind played with the cracks like harp strings, though without music, just with the dullness that wears you down. The pig wheezed in its sleep, occasionally snorting, as if to remind us of something it had never learned. My mother occasionally dozed off, then toppled forward, woke up again, and pushed the fur further over me, as if it were a promise that would hold as long as it was heavy. It held.

So I grew that first day, and if growing means learning from smoke that it doesn't hurt, and from clay that it holds you when you fall, then I grew fast. I memorized the sound of breathing in a hut: the back and forth, the saying and answering, the brief gasp when someone dreams they're running, yet lying

down. I memorized the silence between two breaths: the world's intake of air before it slaps you in the face again.

On the second night, someone knocked on the wall, not the door. Doors are a luxury, walls are enough. It was a neighbor, his breath white in the crack, his voice creeping in like a cold cat. "I'll borrow a crow's foot," he said. "The animals in the field—they eat as if they've been invited." My father growled something that sounded as if he had all the crows in his head, and gave him the foot: dried, wrapped in thread, with a sliver of resin that acted like amber. Magic helps if you mean it. Sometimes just having it helps.

One morning—perhaps the third, perhaps the fifth, here you count mornings until hunger forces you to name the day—my mother placed me in her arm, which was speckled with scars, as if time had dropped sparks there. She walked with me to the front of the hut. The forest stood like a dark ridge at the edge of the village, the trees' crowns brushing the sky as if combing it. Between the trunks lay the kind of silence that men say is peace and women say is caution. The ground was still frozen, and the earth smelled as if it knew, but it had better keep quiet. My mother took a deep breath, so deep that I thought she wanted to take the whole forest into herself, and blew her breath in my face. "This is what home smells like," she said. "And this is what danger smells like." Sometimes they're the same thing.

Throughout the village, dogs ran around that no one owned, but that belonged to everyone. They scraped the ground like blunt knives, sniffing as if we were all just a lead in their big case. One stopped, looked at me, tilted his head, as if considering whether I was edible. "Later," my mother said. The dog understood. Dogs understand "later" better than humans.

The first hands that held me weren't soft. The neighbors' hands were chapped, warm, busy. They weighed me like one weighs something one assesses before hanging it in the smoke. "Heavy," said one. "Good," said another. A third pressed his finger to my lip, I snapped at it like a fish, and he laughed. "Hungry," he said. "He'll stay."

Behind the village, a stream ran its glassy tongue over stones. The stream didn't know our names, but it knew our feet. I would later walk in it, pressing the mud between my toes like a seal. I would catch fish in it that thought water was everything. Water is a lot, but not everything. Sometimes water is just what makes you cold before life warms you up.

The village blacksmith—he had arms that looked as if they had their own skeleton—came to the hut in the evening. He brought a piece of iron that would one day be something: a clamp, a hook, a hold. He placed it on the ground as if laying down an offering. "For the little one," he said. "So that he never lacks a hold." Iron doesn't talk when it's cold, but it listens. I stared at the metal as much as a newborn can stare, and somewhere the air vibrated as if there were a sound only I was allowed to hear. Iron stays in the mind. It takes up space, makes order, says, "If you fall, fall on me." I fell often. It held more often than I deserved.

At night, my mother told stories, none with princes, none with happy endings. Stories of women who saved the harvest while men made noise in the forest. Stories of children who tricked the river by pretending to drown, then drank the water until it believed them. Stories of gods too drunk to help, yet honored anyway, because you need someone to blame when everything goes wrong. I listened as a vessel listens: silent, open, ready to hold something too heavy.

One day, Frost came into the hut, even though the fire was still burning. Frost has its own way of getting through doors. It sits on my eyelashes, on the pig's bristle, on the fur across my chest. My mother warmed me with her hands, which suddenly looked very large and very tired. She had the look women have when they know in the morning that the day will be too much, but they bear it anyway. "Be strong," she said. "Or be loud. Quiet ones are the first to disappear." I remembered that. Later, I would be strong. And if not, then loud. Usually both.

When I first got a fever, the world smelled of copper and old wood. The midwife put herbs in the water, and the steam crept into my nostrils until my head felt lighter. My father sat by the bed—board, salt bags, fur—and pretended he wasn't asleep. Men always sleep when they want to be awake. He told me about a wolf he'd once seen, as big as two men, with eyes that didn't need the night. "You're like that," he murmured, slipping a finger under my small fist. I grabbed, because grabbing is the first thing you can do when you've already mastered nothing. "Strong," he said. "Already." Later I learned he'd been lying: He'd never seen a wolf, only heard of one making a television out of a sheep's belly. But lies are electric fences: They keep things in place until you're old enough to cross them.

The hut was full of sounds you couldn't see. Wood works when it gets cold. Clay sighs when it drinks water. Fire speaks when fat flows into it. Pigs negotiate in their sleep. And somewhere in the distance, the forest made its great, soft breathing. That breathing was my lullaby. Later, when I heard people

talking about music in Roman houses—strings, flutes, voices—I just smiled. Music is good. Breathing is truth.

So I grew in the first few weeks, and the village grew with me, just as a shoe grows with the foot if it's made of leather and gets wet often. I learned that you can put your tongue in the smoke to check if it tastes the same as yesterday. I learned that you can scratch the clay with your fingernails until it stays under your nails, and that this is soothing when the wind whistles through the cracks. I learned that pigs listen when you whisper secrets to them and that they will never betray you. Maybe because they can't speak. Maybe because they're smarter.

At some point, my mother carried me to the edge of the village, where a pile of stones lay, stacked as if a giant had laid his backbone there. "Here lie our names," she said. "Not written. Spoken. If you live loudly enough, you'll hear them." I reached out, encountering air, encountering cold, encountering the feeling that something inside me wanted to move forward, not back. And somewhere among the stones, in the shadow of a moss that looked like a small green fist, I thought I heard an echo. It said nothing intelligible. But it was patient.

When I was finally big enough to hold the jug with both hands—just until it was empty—my father sat me on the threshold. Thresholds aren't chairs; they're contracts. "You see," he said, "this is everything. And beyond it is everything that wants to kill you." He pointed at the forest, at the sky, at the people. "If you go, don't go alone. If you stay, don't remain silent. If you fall, fall forward. Then at least you'll see what hit you."

That night, just before sleep came—sleep comes here on rough soles and places a hand over your mouth that smells of ash—I heard the pig again. It was smacking its lips, dreaming perhaps of acorns, of mud, of a short, good life ending with a long, bad knife cut. I understood. I understood better than I understood anything else. We are no better than pigs. We are just louder. I decided to get loud. If I had the choice between dying quietly and living loudly, I would make so much noise that even the forest would raise its head.

This was my cradle: a board, two sacks, a hide, a fire, a pig, a forest. And I, in the middle of it all, like a piece of iron, not yet knowing whether it would one day become a knife or a hook on a door. Someone put their hand on my forehead—my mother, the blacksmith, the midwife, I don't remember—and the pressure said: Stay. I stayed. Not because it was beautiful. But because beauty in this hut meant that everything you needed was there: smoke to

breathe, dirt to stand on, voices to contradict, and the suspicion that something lurks outside that doesn't know your name and will learn it.

I swore to myself—as well as a child can swear, with milk on my lips and soot on my tongue—that one day I would go out, through the smoke, through the clay, through the dogs, through the voices, and come back, heavier than I had gone. Heavier with stories, with scars, with enemies. And that those who would have to hold me would then need both hands. Not to save me. To carry me. Into the hall. To the fire. To the cups. To the names.

This was my birth: no drums, no gods dancing above clouds, no men in white robes saying things that sound like the future. Just breath, smoke, clay. And me. Enough to set a world on fire. Enough to smother it with my hand, if necessary.

Chapter 3: The Romans stink of perfume and lies

I came into their camp like a stone pretending to be bread. They let me through because I was useful: strong arms, quick eyes, the right mix of obedience and resentment. They called it order, and order smelled of oil, leather, old sweat, and a perfume that the officers poured over everything like honey over bad bread. It concealed nothing. It only whetted the appetite for the truth beneath.

At the gate stood a man with eyes like two small coins. He stared through me as if I were air that could march. Behind him was the palisade, beyond that the world of straight lines: tents like teeth, paths like wounds one wants to forget, so they bandage them with gravel. They work the ground until it obeys. I stepped inside, and the ground pretended it liked me. Liar.

The drum rhythm fluttered through the ranks, short and crisp, and dry like a cough. The men stepped as one, as if someone had lent them their feet. Helmets gleamed, even though it was raining. Shields hung from arms as if they were innate. I thought of our camp, of fire, furs, noise. It was quieter here, but the silence wasn't peace. It was caution. Beware of the whip, of punishment, of the gaze of a man who gives you forty lashes and yawns while doing so.

"Auxilia?" asked the coin-eyed man. "Auxilia," I said, "and hungry." "Good," he said. "Hunger marches further than pride." Rarely was a Roman right, but sometimes even gods stumble in truth.

The first night smelled of wax and cold wine. I lay on a straw sack, which apologized for being straw, and listened to the lots being cast outside. Dice on wood, flat voices, a toothless laugh. A man whispered a prayer to a god whose name sounded so elegant that it couldn't possibly be honest. I turned sideways and smelled the oil in my armor. It wanted to seep into my skin. I let it. Some enemies you make into your cloak until you know how warm they are.

In the morning, the camp ground its men. They stood in rows that looked as if someone had drawn a ruler across flesh. "Distance! Turn! Forward!" An officer ran along the front, raining his voice down on us. He smelled of laurel and the wine that was never quite at the right temperature. He stopped in front of me, looking up at me as if I were a tree that had decided to become a soldier. "Germanus?" "Germanus." "Strong." "Useful," I said. He liked that. Usefulness is the only endearment they know.

We marched until the gravel taught our soles. Left-right, left-right, the world in rhythm, our senses alert. Their milestones stood at the side of the road, smooth cylinders with numbers that insulted the landscape. "Look," said a centurion, "that's how you make the world. Stone by stone. Step by step. Order devours wilderness." I saw the forest in the distance smile narrowly. Wilderness eats order for breakfast when no one's looking. You just have to choose the right moment.

At lunch, there was bread like the edges of a shield, soup with oil that floated on the surface like gold that wouldn't go in. The wine was lukewarm. They call it culture; I call it compromise with the truth. A legionnaire pressed a bowl into my hand. "Drink," he said. "You look like you could use something." He had the look of a man who understood that rules only apply as long as no one is cold. "What's your name?" he asked. "Armin," I said. It's good to keep half a name between your teeth. "I'm Lucius," he said. "If you're in trouble, look for me. I'm in trouble like other men are in shoes." "Then we'll run to each other," I said.

The officers' tents had plank floors, and with every step the planks said: We're clean here. Cleanliness is pretty. But pretty quickly becomes hollow. I carried a bowl of wine inside because I needed eyes that saw everything. Inside, three men sat around a platter of olives that looked as if they had stolen the world's grass. Cheese that said more than many a general, figs that felt like tongues. They talked about maps and terrain, about tribute and weather, about rituals and reports. No one spoke about people except as numbers. I put the wine down, and someone sniffed. "Something's missing," he said. "Warmth?" I asked. "Virtue," he said, and they all laughed, as if virtue were a joke they already knew.

At night, behind the tents, Rome was honest. They played for coins that had already cheated the pockets of many. One man cursed in a language that wasn't his and still won. There stood a woman in the shadow who asked no questions, and a man in the light who asked too many. One man's nose bled, not because an enemy had struck him, but a friend. I leaned against the post, drank their wine, which tasted like a damp blanket, and learned. I saw who smiles when they lose. I saw who cries when they win. I saw who counts in the dark and who forgets in the light.

On the third day, they let me onto the shield wall. "Formation," the centurion yelled. Shields up, edges tight, bodies behind them like bricks. I stood at the front and felt the weight beside me, right and left, that strange closeness that isn't affection, but holds. "Forward!" We pushed. Not fast. Hard. The ground gave way like a lie told too often. A practice arrow slapped against my shield, bounced off, and the man beside me grinned. "You'll get used to it," he said. "To arrows?" "To everything," he said. I believed him. I got used to their rhythm, to their cuts, to their orders, driven like nails into thin air, until the air looked as if it were made of wood.

The smell lingered. A mixture of ointment and fear. Not the fresh, honest sweat of fear, of men who know they're dying and laugh anyway. No, the preserved sweat of fear, hidden under perfume, like a robber under a cloak. The officers smelled like something you could rub yourself against dying. It helped them sleep, not fight. I held the smell to my nose like a coin. I wanted to find it again later, when I was looking for where the cut hurt the most.

They spat out the word barbarian as if they had a fishbone stuck across their throats. "Barbarus," they said, and I nodded as if they'd correctly stated my rank. We always had a joke that they called us animals while letting us run around in a cage of rules they called discipline and fed obedience. But I kept my ears wide and my mouth small. Those who learn while being hated learn better.

Once, I stood with Lucius at the edge of the ditch and we threw stones to see who could go further. "Why are you here, Germanus?" he asked. "Because I'm not out," I said. He laughed. "Clever." "You?" "Because I owe money." "So," I said. "Then you march for numbers." "We all march for numbers," he said, pointing to the standard. "Some are made of gold, some are on parchment, some are in the heads of men who never have to march." I liked him even more. He barely smelled of perfume. He smelled of gravel.

They were building a road. I watched as they cut the earth, layered it, leveled it, rolled it, and at the end there was a belt on which one could lie without detours. "See," said the engineer, "that's how you overcome swamps." I stepped on it and thought, "That's how you find swamps again." Roads are promises you see from afar. Promises beckon. Good to know.

The preachers in iron told us about duties. "You serve Rome," they said. "Rome serves order, order serves the gods, the gods serve—" They paused because no one knew whom the gods serve. "The law," one said. I thought of our gods, who drink mead and laugh when we fall, and remained silent. Gods serve nothing. They sit where they sit. We are the ones who walk.

In summer, the tents became as hot as iron pans. Oil ran. Men rubbed themselves with it as if they were statues licked by the rain. One patted me on the shoulder. "You're strong. You'd make a good Roman." "I'm something," I said. "What?" "Useful." He liked that again. It's their favorite word because it doesn't demand anything from the heart.

I saw a legate praise his men and beat his horse. I saw a tribune weep in the shadows, softly and cleanly, and in the morning speak again like marble. I saw a boy from Hispania call to his mother in his dreams and laugh at midday during drills as if he had spent the night drinking wine. I saw them all serve the same machine: a thing of rank and wages, of fear and bread, of reward and chains. Some chains are made of gold. They cut deeper.

Once, there was a feast because the numbers had added up. The meal was a parade: fish that looked as if they'd received an education; bread that tasted of the law; wine that spoke in tongues no one understood anymore. The legate raised his cup. "To Rome," he said. I raised mine and drank to something else. To memories. To later reckonings. To the day when roads lead inward, into the bellies of those who built them.

At night, I lay awake and heard the rain on fabric. It tapped like an accountant. I let the images pass: sign upon sign. Road upon swamp. Perfume upon fear. Map upon countryside. I memorized how long it takes them to turn a column around. How thin the thread is that holds officers on men's wages. Where they eat when there's a fire. Who runs first when there's a bang. Who's last.

"One day," I said to Lucius, "the forest will crush their legs." "A forest is a forest," he said. "Rome is Rome." "And I," I said, "am me." He nodded, not understanding, but liking me anyway. It's strange how friendship sometimes grows in the wrong direction, like a branch that extends over the neighbor's

fence and casts a shadow there. You don't want to cut it down. You just want to know how many more birds will come.

As autumn came, the camp smelled sweeter. Rotting leaves mingled with the perfumed haze, and suddenly everything fit together: decomposition beneath a gleam. I walked along the stockade, placed my flat hand against the wood. It was smooth, like a back that had never seen a whip. "Wait," I said. "Wait a little. I'll get you later." Wood doesn't answer, but it remembers.

They practiced the tortoise with us. Shields over heads, shields at sides, a wandering animal made of wood and iron. "Unstoppable," said the centurion. "Sure," said the optio. I stood beneath it and heard the rain drumming. "Sure" feels like prayer the first time you say it. The second time, you can already hear the doubts. The third, you feel the gaps. I memorized the gaps. That's exactly where the arrow grows. That's exactly where the knife fits. That's exactly where the step breaks.

"What do you see, Germanus?" asked the Optio. "I see where we're breathing." "And?" "Where you're suffocating." He blinked. He thought it was humor. It was therapy.

One evening, the order came to lead a patrol. I took four men with me: Lucius, a mute Gaul, a thin Greek who knew the stars better than his sword, and a bull-necked Italian who saw an ambush in every bush and was too often right. We walked along the ditch, across the road, into the edge of the woods. The forest breathed as it breathes, no matter whose flag was in the shadows. I stopped. The moon hung slantingly, as if someone had tiredly hung it in the sky. "Do you hear?" I asked. They heard only their hearts. I heard the ground. I heard where it softens. I heard where it wants to keep men. "Back," I said. "Why?" "Because the ground is hungry." We went back. The next day, in the same hollow, the tracks of three were found who would have liked to see us there. Lucius brought me bread and said nothing. There is thanks that is quieter than breathing.

I stayed long enough to learn everything there was to learn, and short enough not to forget who I am. I wore their armor, but not their skin. I drank their wine, but not their lies. I marched their streets, but I memorized where they ended and became earth again. I inhaled their perfume, held it, and stored it like an enemy in the cellar. So that I would recognize them later, when they tried to pass me again.

One morning, as the fog lay like a wet blanket over the camp, I stood at the gate and smelled once more. Oil. Leather. Perfume. The three saints of their order. I took a deep breath, deep enough to straighten my spine. "See you soon," I said to the stockade. "Stay clean. It'll get dirty faster when I come back."

I went out, back through the edge of the forest, which is never straight and therefore honest. Behind me, the camp continued to drum its beat, as if good rhythm could drown out death. Ahead of me waited mud, smoke, voices that could say my name without rinsing their mouths. I smiled. I had stolen their strengths, stuffed them in my pockets, wedged them between heart and liver. Shield to shield. Pressure before blade. Patience before greed. Road before swamp—and the swamp beneath it all.

I swore to myself: I'll bring back their scent. Not the perfume. The one underneath. The sweet, rotten one that no one puts in amphorae. When steel speaks and the forest pinches, you'll smell it. And then, when someone says "order," they'll mean "funeral."

I walked faster. The path was awake. So was I. Behind me remained a world of perfume and lies. In front of me was one that stinks and is therefore true. I knew where I belonged. And I knew who the morning would belong to when we next saw each other.

Chapter 4: Sword in hand, beer in the belly

The forest breathed cold, but the fire before us breathed hotter. Sparks jumped from the logs like angry flies, and anyone sitting too close got burn marks on their hides. Two whole pigs rotated over the fire, slowly, languidly, dripping – fat falling into the embers, sizzling, rising, and mingling with the smoke from the juniper wood. This smell was our prayer: meat, fire, the distance of the Romans.

I sat with the sword on my knees, as if it were a part of me I didn't want to put down. The blade gleamed in the fire, the leather on the hilt warm from my hand. Some men put their weapons away when they drink, to feel safe. I put my weapon away when I want to sleep—and tonight I didn't want to sleep. Tonight I wanted to feel alive.

Mead was passed around. The jug was made of wood, but lined with tin, so the honey wine tasted like sunshine that had been simmering in the cellar too long. Thick, sweet, warm in the throat. Every sip left a trail in my chest that burned all the way down to my stomach, where it stayed like a bonfire. I took a deep sip, passed it on, heard Hrodgar's muffled swallowing next to me.

"Slower," I said. "Faster," he said. "Otherwise you'll miss the courage." "Courage is in my blood." "Mead makes him bigger." "Mead makes him dumber." "Great stupidity wins wars," said Hrodgar, and downed the rest.

To our left, two boys were kneeling, playing with throwing knives. They formed a line in the dirt, stepped back, and threw. Sometimes the blade hit, sometimes the hilt, and every time one of them missed, the knife head rammed into his ribs. You learn faster that way. Behind them, the older ones laughed, shouting advice that no one heeded.

At the fire, one man tore a piece of meat from the spit, blew on it briefly, and took a bite, even though the juice was still hot enough to burn his lip. He cursed, laughed, and drank. Another sang a verse about a woman who slit her husband's throat in his sleep because he'd drunk too much. We all sang along to the last two lines because they rhymed and you could shout them.

A little further away, there was an argument. First just one loud word, then two, then a crash as a tankard hit the ground. The sweet smell of spilled mead wafted over to us briefly. One of the men grabbed the other's collar; they staggered, bumped into each other, slipped in the mud. We half-turned, but we were still laughing. Fights around the fire are like thunderstorms in the distance—first beautiful, then dangerous, then close.

Bear sat diagonally opposite, half a step outside the circle of light, as if he didn't want to be part of the noise, but merely a spectator. He chewed on a bone, turning it in his mouth like a piece of leather, and watched the two squabblers. "Too much arm, too little hip," he muttered. "This won't work." I grinned. "Maybe they don't want to win. Maybe they just want to start." "Starting is easy. Stopping is hard."

The argument grew, as fire grows when the wind changes. One drew a knife, the other the broken handle of the jug. It was no longer a game. I placed my hand on my sword, not to draw it, but to remind it that it would soon be ready to work. The man with the knife leaped forward—and would have leaped into the other's stomach in the next heartbeat if Sigar hadn't intervened.

Sigar was young, slender, and drunk enough to be brave. He brought his knife-arm down, pushed the man back, and kicked him into the mud. "Not around the fire," he growled. "There's peace around the fire." No one objected. "Outside" meant where blood can sink into the earth without the smoke reporting it to the gods. Inside was mead, meat, and the pretense that we were brothers.

I took the pitcher back, drank, and looked at Sigar. "You're stupid, but not wrong," I said. "Better than wrong and smart," he replied, and sat back down. We clinked glasses.

The embers crackled, the pigskin burst, and a stream of hot fat ran hissing into the coals. The smell made us all fall silent for a moment—that's the moment when men know the wait is almost over. In war, meat is more precious than gold.

Lucra, the wolf's mantle, sat down next to me, his fur smelling of rain and horse. "Arminius," he said, "tomorrow you'll come with me." "Where?" "To where men in armor sleep." I looked at him. He grinned. "And we'll wake them." "I'll drink to that," I said, and did so.

The mead was now flowing faster than the words. Voices grew louder, hands heavier, laughter sharper. Someone began drumming on the shields, and the rhythm spread. First two shields, then five, then half a dozen. We sang along, off-key, true fury. The fire was a circle, and we were the flames.

An elderly man, Thorwald, told a story of a battle against the Bructeri. "We had mead in our bellies and the forest at our backs," he said. "That's the best position." He laughed and coughed at the same time, spat into the fire, and the sparks flew like little warriors making one last attack just before death.

I was only half-listening because my sword was still beside me, and I was running my fingers along the edge. Even drunk, I felt every tiny imperfection. The blade was clean, but it needed work. I understood her. Work is the only thing that keeps a weapon young.

"Arminius," said Bear, "if you fall tomorrow, I'll drink for you." "Two mugs," I said. "One for me, one for the one who made it." Bear grinned broadly. "And if I fall?" "Then I'll drink three. One for you, one for him, and one so I can forget him."

We drank for a long time. So long that the fire had to be refueled twice, and the pigs on the spit were killed twice. So long that even the loudest voices became quieter. So long that only the crackling of the embers, the occasional smacking of the lips, and the dull clinking of wooden mugs remained.

I leaned back, feeling the mud beneath my heels, the mead in my stomach, and the sword at my side. Perhaps tomorrow we would rise and move into the forest. Perhaps we would feed the forest with life that would never return. But tonight we were still here—with the warmth in our blood and the cold in our grip.

I raised the mug once more, took the last sip, and said quietly, "Tomorrow we'll drink something else." "Tomorrow," murmured Hrodgar beside me, "we'll drink blood."

Nobody laughed.

The forest held the night tight, as if it didn't want it to pass. Clouds drifted above us, heavy as full wineskins, but the wind didn't break through. The fire was our only heaven—red, hot, sizzling as pig fat fell into the embers. The smell was like a promise, and promises here rarely lasted longer than a flagon of mead.

I had draped my sword across my thighs as if it were an animal I was petting. Even though the mead was already burning behind my eyes, I wanted to know it was there—heavy, cold, ready. The blade was clean, but that was only because it had last seen Roman blood, washed away by rain. Steel forgets quickly if it isn't fed.

The mead passed around the table, and each time the jug found my hand, the night grew warmer. The taste was sweet, but with a sharpness reminiscent of a knife. It didn't burn immediately—it crept down the throat, settled deep and broad in the belly, and when it settled, it moved in the arms and legs as if it wanted to escape.

Hrodgar slapped me on the back, hard enough to make my sword clink. "Drink more, Arminius! Otherwise the mead will think you're afraid."

“I’m not afraid of the mead.”

"Then drink to prove it to him."

I drank.

Next to the fire, two of them were fighting again, this time just for fun—if you can call it that when you kick each other into the dirt. Bear, our silent giant, chewed on a bone and watched them as if they were piglets wrestling over the last apple. "They're wasting their blows," he said. "You have to count them."

“We won’t count until tomorrow,” I said, “when it counts.”

An exchange of blows, a laugh, a scream, then the usual ending: both in the mud, both grinning, both bleeding from the nose. Sigar, the youngest, poured mead into their mouths so no one would forget that we were still brothers today.

Then came the second madness of the evening.

Lucra, with the wolf's coat and the eyes of a man who never goes sober, stood up and shouted, "Guns! Now!"

A few laughed, but he remained serious. "Ten men, one target, thirty paces into the woods. With sword and shield. Whoever comes back without falling gets the rest of the spear."

“And if two come back?” asked Hrodgar.

“Then they fight for it.”

I stood up. Not because I needed the meat, but because I needed the forest. We lined up in a line. The skins were wrapped tightly around our shoulders, our swords at our belts, our shields on our arms. The ground before us was dark, damp, full of roots waiting to snare a drunken foot.

Lucra gave the signal. We ran.

Mead makes you fast—until it slows you down. The first man stumbled after just five steps, the second laughed so hard he crashed into a tree trunk. I jumped over a root, ducked under a branch, and smelled the damp ground, which breathed leaves and moor. Hrodgar panted behind me, and in front of me only the shadow of Wolfman's cloak flitted.

Suddenly, there was a cracking sound in the undergrowth to the side. No one present. No laughter. A sound as if someone was waiting. I drew my sword, the euphoria receded briefly into the background. The shadow moved. A deer—or perhaps a man who didn't know there was no war today. I held my gaze for a heartbeat longer, then I ran on.

The turning point was an old, fallen tree. We had to go around it, and that's where most of us stumbled. Lucra returned first, with me close behind. The others trickled in—panting, laughing, cursing. Two were missing. One came with a torn tunic, the other with blood on his forehead that wasn't his own. No one asked. Some nights, you don't ask questions.

Lucra and I stood facing each other. The meat on the spit slowly rotated, the fat crackling. "Fight?" he asked.

“Only if you’re sure you can still chew.”

He grinned and pushed the bone toward me. "Eat. I'm not fighting you today."

We ate.

Back by the fire, the mead was even sweeter. The intoxication was deeper, but clearer. The forest still smelled on me, and the sword felt lighter. We drank until the fire had been fed twice and the sparks shot high into the sky as if trying to steal the moon.

Towards the end of the night, when even Hrodgar was singing softly, I looked into the fire and thought: Tomorrow, when we get up, the ground will be cold,

and the sword will be heavy again. But tonight—tonight it was light. Tonight it belonged only to me.

I raised the tankard, drank the last sip, and placed the sword in the mud beside me. "Tomorrow," I said quietly, "we'll need more than mead."

“Tomorrow,” Bear murmured from the shadows, “we need ground.”

And the forest listened.

Chapter 5: First Drinking Party with the Old People

Evening came as if it had devoured the sun. The smoke rose, thick and greasy, and the fire was large enough to make even the shadows in the forest tremble. I heard my name called, not softly, not kindly, but with that harshness that says: Come here or I'll get you. I knew immediately what it meant. It wasn't a call to battle, but worse: my first feast with the elders. Everyone knew that on an evening like this, one could die. Not by the blade, but by the jug.

They were already sitting in a circle, like gods with scarred faces. Their beards glistened with pig fat, their eyes red from smoke, and their voices so rough they looked as if they'd swallowed stones. In front of them stood the tankards—big as skulls, heavy as axe heads. The smell of mead hung in the air, sweet and heavy, so sweet that you felt sick before you took the first sip. I sat down, feeling the stares. One grinned, another spat on the embers. "Today he'll learn," one said. "Today he'll puke," another said, and the laughter rolled around me like thunder.

The first tankard came to me. Warm, sticky, sweet. It was heavier than a shield, heavier than anything I'd carried up to that point. "Drink, boy," said Bear, his hands like roots that could tear the ground apart. "And no small sips. There are only big men here." I took a sip; the mead flowed thick and sweet, it stuck to my teeth, it didn't burn like fire, it gnawed like hot honey. I gulped until the tankard was empty and set it down hard on the ground. They nodded, and one called out, "He can swallow. Let's see if he can hold it."

The second pitcher arrived, and I could already feel the first one working inside me. My head felt light, my stomach heavy. But I drank. I drank because I knew: if I hesitated now, I'd remain a child. The elders sang as I went along, songs

about mead, blood, and women, but rarely in that order. After the third pitcher, my fire vanished. After the fourth pitcher, I heard the laughter twice as loud. After the fifth pitcher, I saw faces swimming like fish underwater.

Between the tankards, they told stories. Stories that sounded more like madness than truth. Hrodgar began, as always. He told of the battle against the Bructeri. "We had mead in our bellies and the forest at our backs," he shouted, his beard glistening with saliva. "That's the best position if you want to kill. The forest sings you songs, and the mead gives you arms that strike harder than a hammer." He made the motion as if he were crushing an opponent's ribs, and everyone cheered. "And do you know, Arminius? I didn't count how many men I slew that day. I counted how many tankards I emptied afterward. And that was more than enemies."

Bear was next to speak. His voice was deep, so deep that you felt as if the ground were rumbling along with it. "I once captured two Romans," he said, holding the bone in his hand as if it were still one of them. "I tied them to a tree and gave them as much mead to drink as they could. One puked after the third mug, the other after the fifth. Do you know what I did? I let the first one go. The one with five mugs remained. A man holding five mugs is more dangerous than ten with swords." The old men laughed, and I didn't know if it was a joke or the truth.

Thorwald, the eldest, with a beard so yellow you'd think he drank more urine than mead, also recounted. "I once strangled a man just because he took the last sip before it was my turn," he said. "And when he was dead, I squeezed the mead out of his stomach, licked it up, and it tasted even better because it went right through him." The camp laughed, the jugs clinked, and I felt cold, even though the fire burned hot.

Sigar, the youngest among them besides me, grinned and told his story. "I was drinking with the Chatti women," he said, "and one of them poured me more mead than I could carry. I vomited on her stomach, and she laughed and shouted, 'Now you're a man.' I slept with her anyway, and in the morning she called me her best warrior." The laughter was so loud that even the horses in the background became restless.

They drank, and I drank with them. Each jug burned slower, heavier. After the sixth, I didn't know if my heart was still beating or if it was already swimming. After the seventh, I stood up, trying to show strength, and almost fell into the fire. Hands grabbed me, laughed, and patted my back. "He's swaying like a man," cried Hrodgar. "One more jug, and he'll be swimming."

I took the eighth, but it was my end. I stumbled away, the voices behind me like a wailing choir. I knelt down, the forest suddenly smelling sweet like rotten fruit, my stomach cramped, and then it all came out. Mead, meat, pride—all onto the ground, steaming in the cold. I vomited until my eyes watered, until I lay in the mud, and the ground was harder than any sword.

The old men roared, laughed, and sang. "Now he's one of us!" cried Hrodgar, and the jugs rose in unison. "A man who vomits is a man who lives!" I heard them as I knelt in my own vomit, and laughed too, because I couldn't help it.

When I opened my eyes at dawn, I was lying in the dirt, my fur sticky, my hands cold, my head split open. Bear stood over me, offering me his hand. "Welcome, Arminius," he said. "Now you belong to us." I took his hand and staggered to my feet. My stomach hated me, my head hated me, but I grinned.

They say a man becomes a warrior through battle. I say a man becomes a warrior the first time he pukes in front of everyone—and they still laugh and hand him the jug.

And I was one of them.

Chapter 6: The Women of the Cherusci - Harder than any battle

The smoke hung over the village as if it had decided to eat its way into the roofs forever. The men were still sitting by the fire, but their voices grew quieter when the women arrived. It was always like this. When they appeared, their gazes lowered, not out of shame, but because everyone knew that the true mistresses were now here. We pretended to be warriors, but the truth was: they made us what we were, and they broke us when they wanted to.

A Cheruscan woman was no delicate flower. She was a storm in your fur, a bare-handed blow, a knife that lay beside your throat at night and cut flesh in the morning. They rarely laughed, and when they did, it wasn't at jokes, but at men who fell over because they thought they could keep up. I remember my first encounter with one of them. Her name was Albruna. Her gaze was harder than any iron, her hands calloused, as if they had chopped more wood than I had slain Romans. I thought I was already a warrior; I had blood on my sword and mead in my stomach. But when I stood before her, I realized I was just a boy.

She smelled of smoke and earth, and I didn't know whether to kiss her or run away from her. She looked at me, pulled me into the tent by my fur, and before I could say anything, I was lying on my back, her knee on my chest. "You're weak," she said. "Not yet, but soon." She drank from a pitcher, let the rest run into my mouth, and as I coughed, she laughed. Not that bright laugh Roman women have in the theater, no—this was deep, ragged, full of mockery and lust. And then she hit me, not hard enough to kill me, but hard enough that I wouldn't forget it.

The ancients always said that a woman shapes a man until he either breaks or grows stronger. They weren't mothers in the Roman sense, not velvety hands stroking curls. They were mothers who tossed children painfully into the mud, and if the child didn't cry, they slapped it so it learned that life makes noise.

I remember one night when we returned from hunting. Our stomachs were empty, our hands tired, our throats full of dust. We thought we were being celebrated, as Romans celebrate their victors. Instead, the women stood there, arms folded, faces cold. "You're no good?" one said. "Then eat your shame." And we sat down in the dirt while they walked past us as if we were dogs who didn't deserve the bone. Only when we returned the next day with meat did they give us mead—and even that tasted like punishment.

I tell you, the Romans may have swords, rows of metal, and gleaming shields. But no Roman legion ever frightened me as much as the look of a Cheruscan woman when she's disappointed. A spear can pierce you, but a woman's gaze hollows you inside.

And it wasn't just roughness. It was this wild lust they had, as if they were demons themselves. I once lay with one whose name I didn't even know. Her hair was black, her body smelled of horse and smoke. She drank more mead than I did, and when I thought I had her, she just laughed and squeezed me so hard I saw stars. I didn't know whether to die in her womb or be born. She slapped me in the face, bit my shoulder, and when I lay semi-conscious at the end, all she said was, "You're better than most—but you're still nowhere near a man." The next morning I could hardly walk, and every step burned like fire. But I walked with my head held high because she had allowed me to.

There were also the elderly, the mothers who brought life into the world with cold hands while men died outside. I saw a woman who screamed, gave birth, and smashed a man's head with a stick in the same breath when he came too close. And when the child breathed, she wrapped it in a fur, washed her hands in water, and went out to chop wood. No complaints, no whining, no "Oh, how

difficult." Roman women would have broken down. Cheruscan women carried on.

We boys often talked about them around the fire. We boasted, told stories about how we had had them, how they had adored us. But in truth, we feared them more than any enemy. For they had no mercy. A Roman could kill you. A Cheruscan woman could let you live—and make you so small that you wished you were dead.

I remember one night when we sang, laughed, and drank. Then an older woman came, with gray streaks in her hair. She looked at us and said, "You laugh loudly, but can you also work?" No one answered. She spat on the embers and left. The next day, she woke us at dawn, dragged us into the field, made us carry wood and drag stones until our hands bled. And that evening, she stood by the fire again, handed us mead—and smiled, for the first time. That smile was worth more than all the Roman gold.

I tell you: harder than any battle are the women of the Cherusci. Harder because they don't end when the blood flows. Harder because they can break you not only outside but also inside. Harder because after a battle, you know you're alive. But after a night with them, you don't know if you want to live or if you've already died.

And yet—or perhaps because of it—we loved her. We lived for her, died for her, drank for her. You could lose a sword. You could drop a jug. But to win the gaze of a Cheruscan woman—that was the only victory that mattered.

There was the one with red hair, known only as the Foxy One. She never laughed, except when blood was drawn. I was lying with her once at the edge of the woods, the fire almost out, and I thought I had her to myself. But suddenly she pulled out a knife, pressed it to my throat, and whispered, "Don't move, or you'll just be a story." I was sweating, but I kept still, and then she laughed for the first time. She threw the knife aside and rode me like a horse, biting my ear until it bled. When I got up the next morning, the knife was lying next to me, and on my chest, a symbol carved in my own blood. A circle. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew I would never forget it.

Then there was the blonde, called the Mare because she tamed horses no one else could even touch. She drank mead as if it were water, and when she spoke, it was as if the ground itself was listening. I saw her once in the village green, slapping a man who had talked back to her. He was twice her size, but he fell as if he'd been hit by a tree. Later, she took me, put me on her back, and

while I still thought I was in control, she ripped my hide away as if I were mere prey. She rode me with a ferocity that feared me more than any battle. And when I was gasping for breath at the end, she laughed and said, "You'll last longer than most. You might even live." Never before had praise been so harsh.

The third was the old woman with the gray strands, whom I simply called the Crow. She spoke little, but when she did, everyone listened. I saw her once in the middle of the night, standing in the rain, singing while she slaughtered a goat. Her song wasn't a comfort; it was a threat. She saw me, saw through me, and I knew that to her I was just another boy she would one day either bury or help give birth to. When she came to me later, she put her hand on my forehead, as if checking if I was sick, and said, "You will kill many, but most of the wounds will be inflicted by women." She left, and I didn't know whether she was blessing me or cursing me.

And then there was the black-haired witch. She spoke to no man, only to the gods, and the gods spoke back to her. Sometimes in my sleep I heard her voice, soft, scratchy, as if it were part of the wind. One evening she sat down beside me, gave me a tankard, and I drank. The mead tasted bitter, and before I knew what was happening, I was lying in her tent. She didn't look at me as she took me, as if I were merely a tool for her body. In the morning I was sore, empty, and there were marks carved into my arm that would not disappear. I wore them like scars, and whenever I went into battle, I thought they would glow.

These women, each in their own way, were tougher than any legion, any spear, any sword. I could hate Romans, I could slay them; they were enemies. But the Cherusci women were trials that never ended. They held out their jug, and you drank. They laid you down, and you remained silent. They beat you, and you thanked them. Every battle had an end. But with them, it began anew every day.

Chapter 7: How to kill a Roman the fastest

The old men sat around the fire, their beards greasy from the pork, their hands heavy from the mead, and one of them asked me in this half-slurred, half-serious voice: "Arminius, you've already laid enough Romans to rest, tell us: What's the quickest way?" I laughed because it was the kind of question that always came with more mead than answers. But they all looked at me: Bear, Hrodgar, Thorwald, Lucra in the wolf's cloak, even the youngest, Sigar, who could barely sit upright. They wanted an answer, and so I gave them one that

was like a slap in the face. "Quickest?" I said. "By scraping the perfume from their bones and hitting them where they're most human." And then I drank, so the words wouldn't sound too sober.

The Romans march like puppets. Always straight, always in time, as if they had a god pulling their feet like marionette strings. But if you get close enough, you see that they shit just as badly as we do. And therein lies the secret: They're men, not gods. And men die quickly if you know where to stick the knife. In the neck – where the breath wants to go out. In the side – where the ribs no longer protect. In the groin – one stab, and even the greatest legionnaire screams like a child feeling a stick for the first time.

I told them about the day in the forest when I caught a centurion. He stood there, his plumed head and his gaze proud, as if he were about to recite the entire Teutoburg Forest like a law. I came from behind, quietly, as quietly as an animal that doesn't have to hunt because it already knows it's going to win. I placed the blade against his neck, drawing it like a line in the sand, and his head suddenly felt lighter than his body. He fell, and I kicked him with my foot so he wouldn't think he was dying cleanly. "So simple," I told the men, "you just have to get close enough."

They laughed, drank, and one shouted, "But what if he sees you?" I grinned. "Then you'll have to get dirty." I told them about the battle by the river, where one of those Roman dogs almost speared me. He was bigger than me, stronger, his helmet gleamed as if he'd fed it oil. I pretended to fall, sliding in the dirt, and he came closer, even laughing. So I took a handful of mud and threw it in his face. As he staggered blindly, I stabbed him in the side, twisted the iron like a key in a lock, and he sank like a sack. "They hate to die dirty," I said, "and that's why we love to give them the dirt last."

The men cheered, raised their tankards, mead splashed over fires and beards. "One more story!" roared Hrodgar, and I had to laugh because the evening had already brought enough blood to their heads, even without fighting. But I carried on, for words were cheaper than blood. "Once," I began, "one tried to surprise us in the forest. He stumbled, slipped, and fell on his own sword, stabbing him in the stomach. I swear, the forest swallowed him whole. We had to do nothing but watch and laugh. The quickest death is the one they give themselves." The laughter was so loud that even the trees trembled.

But amidst all the drinking and mockery, I also told them the truth, just as it was. "Killing a Roman is easy. But going on living is hard. They stare at you with eyes that no longer know what they see. And sometimes they come back at

night, not with swords, but with looks that ask you why. Then you must drink. Then you must laugh. Then you must pour the mead deeper than their screams." I looked into the flames and felt the silence briefly become heavier, until Hrodgar laughed again to dispel the heaviness.

At the end, I raised my sword, held it up to the sky, and said, "The quickest way to kill a Roman? By letting him be a Roman. Proud, clean, orderly. Then he'll stumble on his own, and all you have to do is raise your hand." We clinked the mugs together, mead flowed, the fire crackled, and the night smelled of blood that wouldn't flow until tomorrow.

And as I drank, I knew that no battle is as cruel as the one fought in your head, when the mead runs dry and the Roman eyes stare at you in your dreams. But you don't tell anyone that by the fire. By the fire, you only tell them how easily they fall. And everyone laughs. And you laugh too. And tomorrow you'll tell them again.

Chapter 8: Varus – the man with the dead look and the full mouth

Varus. The very name tasted like old grease in your mouth. A man who looked as if he'd eaten half of Rome and spilled the other half onto his tunic. When he walked through the camp, you heard him not for his orders, but for his breathing, heavy and greedy, as if fighting against his own weight with every step. He had that dead stare, you know, like someone who's long since stopped seeing the world and only sees the next piece of meat on his plate. I swear, when he looked your way, you didn't feel the authority of a leader, but the hunger of a man who'd gladly devour you too.

The men with us made fun of him. Around the fire, he wasn't called Varus, but "the full jug." One said he could march two legions, but not up a flight of stairs. Another swore he'd seen Varus fall asleep in his tent while a servant was taking off his shoes, and the servant was buried underneath because Varus rolled over in his sleep. We laughed about it, we drank to it, and each of us knew that one day we'd see that fat dog lying in the dirt.

I remember a conversation I had with him. I stood before him, still young, and he placed his hand on my shoulder. A soft hand that had never held an axe. He smelled of perfume, of oil, of what the Romans considered purity, but to us it was the stench of death. "Arminius," he said, "you Germans are like wild animals. You just have to tame you, and then you'll become as loyal as dogs." I

wanted to slit his throat right then and there. But I smiled, the way you smile when you watch a sow wallowing in its own filth. I knew his time would come.

His belly hung over his belt like an overfilled mead jug. When he ate, the fat dripped down his chin, and instead of wiping it off, he licked it off, with relish, as if that were true power: the greed that is never satisfied. I saw legionaries standing at attention as if before a god, and I wondered how blind a man must be to see a leader in this walking mess.

A scout once told me he saw Varus defecating. "It took two men to get him back up," the scout said, "and when he stood up, he was so sweaty he looked like he'd fought a battle." The whole camp roared with laughter, and we drank twice as much mead to celebrate this story. Thus, we belittled him, the man with the legions, by talking about his gluttony, his weakness, his gaze, which was so empty you could have locked him in a mirror and he wouldn't notice the difference.

But I knew that behind all the mockery lay a bitter truth. Varus wasn't just fat. He was power. He had legions, and legions are no laughing matter. They march, they tread the ground, they build encampments like cities. And he, the fat ox, stood above them, and that made him dangerous. Fat is soft, yes, but soft isn't weak when it sits on a throne. We could laugh, we could mock, but each of us knew: when we face him, we'll need more than mockery to bring him down.

I often looked into his eyes. They were dead, yes. Not from fear, but from indifference. He had seen everything, had everything, and nothing meant anything to him anymore. That made him different from the other Romans, who were proud, who believed they were gods. Varus no longer believed in anything. He was fed up, tired, dull. But that was precisely what made him tough. A man who no longer wants anything, who only chews and stares, cannot be broken—only killed.

And I swore to myself that we would kill him. Not quickly, not honorably, but as he had lived: dirty, heavy, in the filth. His fat body would lie in the Teutoburg Forest, his eyes still empty, his mouth open, as if even in death he were still gasping for the next bite.

We drank to that vow. Each of us. Tankards circulated, mead flowed, and we laughed until the forest itself seemed to tremble. But there was no laughter inside me. There was only the image of Varus, the man with the dead stare and the full mouth, and the knowledge that one day he would fall. And when he fell, it wouldn't be like a hero, but like a sack too full to be held.

And I swore I would be the one to see him fall.

Chapter 9: Feasts of the Tribes: Mead, Meat, and Fists

The feast began as it always began: with smoke that settled over the camp like a second skin, and with meat that swirled over the fire until the fat fell in thick drops into the embers and the crackling, like a drum, opened the evening. Drums really were beating, somewhere in the background, dull, raw, as if the gods themselves were pressing their hands to the earth. And then came the mead, pitcher after pitcher, as big as a child's head, so heavy that every sip was a test. We sat, we stood, we lay, we roared, and the feast of the tribes began as if there had never been anything else in the world but mead, meat, and fists.

The first fights weren't long in coming. Two men were arguing over a piece of meat barely bigger than a fist, and the solution was clear: the fists themselves would have to do the talking. They punched each other, one bloody, the other laughing, and the blood dripped onto the floor as if it were part of the meal. We clapped, we shouted, we bet, and in the end, both of us lay by the fire, one with a broken nose, the other with broken pride. And we laughed louder, as if one of us had defeated the Romans.

The women joined in, as always. They drank, they snatched the mugs from the men's hands, they hit just as hard, and if anyone got too cocky, one of them would slap them harder than any punch. Children ran among us, stealing pieces of meat from the spit and disappearing laughing into the shadows, while the elders nodded, as if they knew that it was precisely on these nights that the tribes showed their true strength: not in battles, but in this chaos of booze and blood that bonded us closer together than any speech.

At some point, one of the old men stood up, raised his jug, and said, "Listen! I'll tell you the story of the boy we called Lappenbusch." Immediately, it fell silent—not really silent, but quieter than before. Laughter died down, a few continued drinking, a few looked curiously. "It was while hunting," he began, "the boy, barely older than a lad, had an idea. He took some old rags lying around and wrapped them around a bush. Then he drove a few rabbits and partridges into it. In the Lappenbusch, as he called it, he caught the animals. He killed them, one by one. Only one hare escaped." The old man grinned, his teeth yellow in the firelight. "And then he cried out loudly: Mir ist da etwas durch die Lappen gegangen!"

Laughter erupted like a storm. Men were doubled over with laughter, mead splashed, women laughed dirtyly along, children shrieked, and from then on, we called him Lappenbusch. It was one of those moments that instantly became legendary, not because it was big or important, but because it was real, raw, and honest. We laughed even louder because we all recognized ourselves in it: the thought of a hare running through life while you hold only the rags. We drank to Lappenbusch, we shouted his name, and he, the boy, stood somewhere in the circle, red-faced but grinning like someone who knew he had become immortal—not by a sword, but by a sentence.

After that, the party escalated as usual. One person started singing, out of tune, louder than everyone else, and everyone joined in, even more out of tune, even louder, until even the stars shook. Another beat the drum so hard he tore his hand, but no one stopped. Two men threw knives at a tree trunk, and when one missed, another fight began. Mead flowed freely, women laughed, men yelled, children stole every last bone.

I sat among them, my sword beside me, my tankard in my hand, and thought this was the truth. Not the splendor of Rome, not its straight streets, or its laws. The truth was mead burning in the throat, meat crumbling between the teeth, and fists reminding you you were alive. A battle was ambition. A feast was life.

Later, when half of us were already lying in the dirt, one with his face in the dung, another with his hand in the fire while still asleep, we were still laughing about the rag bush. "I missed something!" someone cried as the jug fell from his hand. And again the whole camp laughed. It was as if that sentence had suddenly explained everything: our victories, our losses, our lives. Something always runs away, and in the end, all you're left with are the rags.

The fire burned deeper, the smoke grew heavier, and one by one we fell. The drums grew quieter, the laughter fainter, and in the end, only a few of us remained sitting around the fire. I looked into the embers, drank the last sip, and thought: Romans would never understand such a feast. They would despise it, as they despise us. But right here, in this chaos of mead, meat, and fists, here we lived, here we grew strong. And here we forged the bonds that the Romans would one day break.

And as the smoke settled, as the forest became silent again, I still heard the laughter in my dream.

Chapter 10: Skull cracks on the riverbank

The river glittered in the sunlight, as if it were a god, wetting our throats when the mead ran too dry. We sat on the bank, the smoke of fried fish hanging in the air, women knelt in the water, washing furs and entrails, children ran shrieking through the mud. I had my sword beside me, tankard in hand, and thought the day might end peacefully. But for us, peace was just another word for boredom, and boredom was useless when there was enough mead in our stomachs.

It started small, as always. Two men were arguing about a woman who was standing by the water, her hands in the foam, her gaze cold as iron. One said she had smiled at him, the other swore she had filled his pitcher. Words turned into shouts, shouts into fists. I grinned, took another sip, and knew it was only a matter of breaths before blood stained the river.

The first blow fell dully, like the crack of a branch, and then all hell broke loose. Clubs, axes, knives—everything hands could find. One jumped into the water, trying to escape, but the other followed him and cracked his skull open in the middle of the river. I saw the water turn red, the fish flash and disappear again, as if they had understood that today was not for swimming, but for dying.

I stood up, my sword in my hand, not because I had to, but because blood always called when it flowed. Before me stood a man with broad shoulders, his face already bloody, his eyes full of rage. He roared, I laughed, and then he swung his club. I ducked, felt the wind on my head, and then I pulled from below upwards. The blade went through his jaw, splitting him all the way to the skull, and his head burst like an overripe fruit. He fell to the grass, the blood spurting in my face, warm, sticky, sweet like the mead I'd just drunk.

The shore was chaos. Men tumbled over each other, women screamed, children ran, but some of the women grabbed sticks and joined in the beating, louder and harder than the men. I saw one of them strike a man over the head with the stick, and when he fell, she kicked him in the face until he lay still. She laughed as if it were a dance.

Beside me, a man stumbled, too drunk to see clearly. Still holding his tankard, he slashed at an opponent who dodged, laughing, and as he fell, the mead spilled into the dirt. "Shit!" he yelled, "that's the last drop!" Then he laughed, even as a spear pierced his shoulder. He fell into the river, the tankard floated away, and he died with a smile, as if it were all just a damn joke.

I fought on, barely feeling the pain, only the force. One skull after another burst open, bones cracked, teeth flew. I drove the sword so deep into one man's forehead that it stuck, and I had to kick to get it free. Another fell to his knees in front of me, and I kicked his head into the water so hard that bubbles rose like fish.

The roar, the thud of blows, the cracking of skulls—it was music, a music only we knew. No Roman trumpets, no marching steps, just the raw song of bones and blood. I laughed as I struck, I drank as I killed, I screamed as the river washed everything away.

At the edge, I saw one climb a tree trunk, axe in hand, and jump from the top. He struck a man, splitting his skull from top to bottom, and both fell into the water. The trunk twisted, blood oozed from it, and the river carried them away as if they were just wood and stone.

Hours passed like minutes. When it grew quieter, bodies lay in the grass on the shore, heads half submerged in the water, half in the mud. Some eyes were still staring open, others were smashed away, and the water was dark with blood. I stood there, the sword heavy in my hand, my chest full of breath, my mouth full of iron and mead.

The survivors sat down on the grass, some laughing, some crying, all drinking. One without an ear, one with a broken arm, one licking his own blood from his hand like mead. We looked at each other and knew that it wasn't an enemy who had tested us today, but ourselves. A feast, a battle, a river full of skulls.

I sat down, drank the rest, and watched the water flow on. Indifferent, calm, as if it hadn't seen any of this. As if the skulls on the bank had never existed. That was the bitterest thing: that the world didn't care, that it carried on while we tore ourselves to pieces.

But I knew: tomorrow we would drink again, laugh again, and if necessary, split skulls again. For this was our life, so raw, so meaningless, so full of blood and mead that even the gods didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

And the river flowed on as if it had seen it all countless times.

Chapter 11: The Night We Defeated the Segimer

The evening smelled of smoke and an offended sky. We sat around the fire, pretending we were only drinking, but everyone knew that drinking was only half a lie for us. Hrodgar held the jug as if it were a head he wanted to wring out, Bear chewed on a bone that any other jaw would have broken, and Sigar stared into the embers as if searching for a sign that would tell him: Today. One brought up the subject, no one dropped it: the Segimer. They had once again taken something that belonged to us—a cow, three barrels of mead, two good knives, and the respect that can only be repaid in peace, with one's mouth full of ash. "Tonight," Hrodgar said, so casually that the fire crackled more quietly. "Tonight we'll repay the debt."

It wasn't a scribe's plan; it was the decision of stomachs full of mead and heads full of images of faces that stop talking when wood meets bone. We stood as one rises from a table when real conversation finally begins. One half-extinguished the fire so the smoke would consume our trail. One tied hides tighter. One took a second spear, out of superstition, out of love, out of stupidity—it's often the same with us. I brushed the blade briefly. Steel answered with coldness, which is the most sincere agreement I know. "Quiet until the first scream," I said. "After that, loud, so they know it's serious."

The forest was dense, like a lie too many people had invested in. We glided into it. Torches? None. Just the few we'd need later to keep things burning that weren't meant to be anymore. The ground was damp from the day, the wind steadied, as if holding its breath to watch. Hrodgar went left, Bear right, I in the middle, because the middle is the place where you first notice when something's going to rip. Behind us trudged the louder ones, but they held together, like barrels in a stream: each ramming the other so no one would tip over.

The river was distant, only a damp smell of cold and algae. We crossed it at the shallow spot where the stones stood out like teeth from the water. A man slipped, cursed, caught himself, kissed the hilt of his spear as if it were the hand of a good woman. Onward. Ahead of us, the smell of a strange fire crept out from under the trees. Wood, fat, men. Segimer smell no different than we do, only they believe their smoke is more important. It was a small camp, half buried in the hollow so the wind wouldn't catch the spark. Good. A hollow also traps screams until they grow late.

I raised my hand. Shadows stood. The dog barked. Of course. Wherever men want to sleep, there's a dog who thinks too much. Sigar crawled forward, threw

his arm, and the piece of bread, rubbed in fat, flew into the circle of embers and shadows. The dog fell silent, as if bitten by a tongue. "Thank you," whispered Bear. "I was just starting to like the dog." We edged closer. I heard one voice, then two, then the smacking of a man drinking to hear no more. "Now," I said, as quietly as you tell a knife to cut.

The first fell without me seeing his face. That's the cleanest death I can give. The second made the mistake of standing up. A standing man makes sounds that wake others: belt, leather, air in the throat trying to speak. I slid the blade to where words live, and the night immediately became more understandable. To my left, wood clanged against bone; to my right, I heard the short, dull sound that only a skull makes when it realizes it has two doors. Then someone roared, "Segimer!" and the forest echoed the syllable like a mockery.

Loudly, then. Torches lit. Flames licked the tent wall, took fur, and grabbed at dry branches, and the night was on our side because it likes to see what dies. Men stumbled out of furs, fumbling for swords with hands that were still asleep. One ran, ran right into Bear, who pressed him so deeply into the ground that the ground later asked if he could have a name now, too. Hrodgar sang, that off-key, scratchy song that always falls from him when he breaks something that no longer complains. I walked through the smoke as though through a standard-bearer, proud, straight, only without the gold.

Someone jumped on my back. He smelled of onions and fear. I let myself fall, not forward, not backward—sideways, where ribs learn to count. He gasped, I rolled, his knife went into the leaves instead of me, and I gave him the lesson that remains every night: earth in his mouth, steel in his throat, silence in his head. A woman called from the tent, her voice cutting in a tone that reminds men of their first slaps. Two of our women, whom we had brought with us because they fight when it makes sense, went toward her. "Don't kill," I said, "just take your hands away." For us, taking your hands away means tying you up until the things that hands do learn to wait. That way you remain human when questions come tomorrow.

The Segimer chieftain—or someone who acted important, and that's the same thing at night—came out of the largest tent. He had a ring on his arm, bent over in the light, shouted a name that didn't answer. I showed him mine. "Arminius," I said, as if I'd offered him a deal. He came straight, shield up, sword down, like someone who's learned it but rarely practiced. I walked diagonally, because diagonally shifts the truth. He hit, I let him hit, only on wood, and when his arm felt the weight, my arm felt the gap. I didn't hit hard, I hit right. He didn't fall right away. Some men have the courtesy to wait until

they're finished. He was bleeding, looked at me, and there wasn't hatred. There was wonder, as if heaven had suddenly brought him the bill.

Behind me, a tent burned. Furs threw sparks as if they were birds with regrets. Sigar laughed too loudly, so he lived. Bear was silent, so he worked. One of our boys—the one with the too-quick courage—took a spear in the side and swore as if the world had given him the wrong word. I pulled him to the tree, stuffing fur into the wound until the blood thought slower. "Stay," I said. "Wherever," he said, smiling crookedly, and I liked him more than I liked how long that lasted.

The Segimer tried to build a line, three shields, four, five, knees in the mud, eyes still half-closed. I respected the attempt. Order under a burning roof is a courage that rarely lasts forever. "Forward," I said, and we took the ground from them. Shield edge to shield edge, bodies like wood being snapped. Two held, one broke, and in the hole grew the rest of our night. Hrodgar jumped in, was suddenly behind them, laughing into the neck of a man he didn't even know, and gave him the shortest nickname: "Out."

There were the usual grotesque events, those invented every night when men want too much and hold on too little. One stumbled on his own tent rope, fell so cleanly that I almost slapped my knees, and rammed his dagger under his ribs as he fell. I could have done the work for him, but I have principles: where the world is already cutting, I'll spare myself my arm. Another tried to throw a torch at us. It flew, burned, went out, fell into a barrel, and turned the barrel into a lamp, showing just how red a lager can be. Someone lost two fingers and then counted to eight, very proud, until Bear showed him why that wasn't a good number.

"Enough!" I shouted, not into the forest, not into the sky—into our faces. It's a word better spoken early than late, if you don't want to end the night with things that will grow into the wrong songs in the morning. "Take what's ours. Burn what shouldn't run. Leave what may run." I pointed at the barrels, at the knives, at the cow that supposedly belonged to us and looked as if it found any sense of belonging annoying. Two men led it, cursing, loving, because that's how men lead things that are heavier than they are.

The Segimer chieftain was still breathing. He lay on his side, the ring on his arm glowing in the light, as if he didn't know whose arm it would adorn tomorrow. I knelt, not out of respect, but so he could hear me. "You've taken," I said. "We'll take more now. That's how it works, until someone stops taking. Today we won't stop." He wanted to say something but couldn't find it. I placed my hand

on his forehead, neither hard nor soft, until his breath decided he'd had enough of this evening.

It fell silent, as after a blow that lands. Only wood crackled, only a horse pawed, only the river somewhere did what it always does: pretend it knew nothing. We gathered. Furs, knives, the barrels that really belonged to us, and two that belonged to us from now on. An old woman sat at the entrance to the tent, staring at me, not angry, not pleading. There are looks that say: The wheel keeps turning, boy, and it has no spokes to hold on to. I left her sitting there. Wars are always carried on by those no one mentions.

The way back was louder, because loads make noise when men think they're light. Behind us, something was still burning; ahead, the path already smelled of its own smoke. Sigar limped, but still kissed the barrel as if it had baptized him. Hrodgar found a song along the way that suited him, and we sang off-key, but together. Bear carried two knives in one hand and kept an eye on the boy who had been leaning against the tree and was now walking between us, pale, awake, breathing. "You're alive," said Bear. "For now," said the boy. "Like all of us," I said.

In our own camp, we laid things out as if we had built them. Mead flowed, of course, because what you take, you drink, otherwise it doesn't know who it belongs to. Someone wanted to count how many Segimer were left. I raised the jug. "Count tomorrow," I said. "Today, what counts is that we're standing." One laughed, one cried, one just nodded, and I thought: There are nights when you win, and there are nights when you don't lose. This was both. Not because we were better, but because we were willing to be dirtier.

Later, when the embers were only red and the smoke no longer interested the sky, I lay on the fur that smelled of a strange tent. The sword lay beside me, the hilt against my hand, as always. I looked into the dark corner where no god dwells and said half-aloud: We have defeated them. The night didn't answer. Nights never answer. They only keep what is given to them and eventually return it as stories that make no one any the wiser, only hungrier.

In the morning, we would count the wounds, the missing fingers, the knives that fit. In the morning, someone would ask if it was right. I know that question. It's never hungry, but it consumes a lot of time. Tonight, it was far away. Tonight, there was only the taste of smoke in our mouths, the soft beating of a heart that had made it again, and the thought that the Segimer now know how quiet we can be before we become loud.

I closed my eyes, not from peace, but from tiredness. Just as I was drifting off, I heard Hrodgar gurgling somewhere—singing in his sleep. Bear answered with a snore that sounded like a blacksmith. Someone murmured a word of thanks to some god who wasn't listening. And the boy, who gets brave too quickly, whispered, "It worked." That's the best report after a night like this. It worked. We worked. And if it has to work again, we'll work again.

The smoke from the strange camp still hung in my hair when the morning brought the first gray. I sat up, took the last sip from a mug that had the wrong notch and therefore now the right one. I wiped my mouth, spat, and stood up. "Today," I said to the furs, the men, the horses, the trees, "today we pretend nothing happened." That's the trick. Pretend the world is normal until it becomes abnormal again. It knows the way.

And somewhere over there, across the river, the Segimer sat in the ashes, counting, cursing, drinking—just like we do when it hits us. The wheel, then. I tied the strap, grabbed the handle, felt the cold say: I'm here. I nodded. "Me too." And the night we gave them was already at our backs like a shield that doesn't shine, but holds.

Chapter 12: My brother, my enemy, my drinking buddy

My brother. When I think of him, my mouth tastes of iron and smoke, and my heart beats like a drum, not knowing whether to call for a dance or a war. He was never my friend, never my enemy, never just my blood. He was everything at once, and that was the problem. We grew up together, fighting in the dirt, laughing at the same stupid jokes, and pulling each other out of the pits we'd fallen too far into. And yet there were nights when I swore I'd strangle him with my own hands, just to share the same mug with him the next morning.

I remember, as children, hunting rabbits in the woods. I had the spear, he had the sling. He hit, I missed. He laughed, I bloodied his nose. He howled, then he hit back, and in the end, we were both bleeding, staring at each other, our eyes full of hate, but the rabbit lay between us, dead, and we shared it, raw and filthy, as if we'd both won. So it began: Victory meant nothing without strife, and strife meant nothing without the taste of blood and loot.

Later, when we became men, our fists turned to steel. Once, it was a woman who divided us. He claimed she smiled at him first, and perhaps he was right, but I didn't care. We screamed, shoved each other, and eventually, we had

swords in our hands. We struck, not for fun, not for play, but with the intention of bringing the other down. I remember his sword grazing my shoulder, my blood soaking the earth, and I swore in that moment that I would kill him. But then the blow came from me, across his face, a scar he bears to this day. He fell, and I stood over him, gasping—and did nothing. Instead of killing him, I picked him up, and he laughed, covered in blood, full of defiance. "You bastard," he said. "You too," I said. Then we drank.

We fought side by side against Romans, and there he was my mirror, my shadow, my second arm. When I slashed left, he sliced right. When I fell, he had my back. He laughed in the midst of battle, and I roared, and together we were like two wolves tearing an ox. But no sooner was the battle over than the quarrel started again. A piece of meat, a mug of mead, a stupid word—and we beat each other as if we'd never killed the same opponents. Once it was so bad that the whole camp watched us roll around like animals who don't know they're brothers. My fist in his face, his teeth in my arm, blood dripping into the dirt, and no one stopped us. Why should they? For the others, it was a spectacle; for us, it was fate.

Later, we sat by the same fire, both bleeding, both panting. A tankard passed back and forth between us. We didn't say a word, because words are stupid in such moments. Only the mead spoke, sweet, burning, reconciling. And at some point, we both laughed, loudly, filthily, as if life had told us a joke that only we understood.

But reconciliation never lasted. He always had different ideas, different ways. He was harsher, sometimes crueler. Where I thought we should wait, he struck immediately. Where I thought we should talk, he just laughed and drew his sword. I hated him for that. And yet I admired him because he did the things I sometimes wouldn't admit to myself. He was my mirror, but a distorted one, one who showed me what I didn't want to see.

Once, during a tribal gathering, he rose up against me. In front of everyone. "Why should we follow Arminius?" he roared. "He thinks too much, he hesitates, he holds back his hand when it should strike." My fingers twitched on the hilt of my sword, my heart burned. I could have slain him there, and half of me would have seen it as justice. But the other half would have hated me. So I let him talk, let him mock, and afterward, when we were alone, we beat each other half to death. He broke my rib, I broke his arm. We lay side by side in the mud, panting, laughing, bleeding, and I thought: If he dies, a part of me dies. If I kill him, I kill myself.

But that didn't change the fact that we argued again, again and again.

The nights were the worst. By the fire, as the mead flowed, every word sparked. He accused me of being too much of a Roman, I accused him of being too much of an animal. He laughed at my ambition, I spat on his recklessness. And in the end, we stood facing each other, hands clenched into fists, eyes full of hatred, while the others watched expectantly. We beat each other until we couldn't anymore, until the mead ran out of us again, mixed with blood. Then we slumped down, and someone shoved the same jug into our hands. We drank, we laughed, we hugged each other as if nothing had happened.

That's how it's always been: enemies, brothers, drinking buddies. I knew I'd never get rid of him. I knew he was always breathing down my neck, like a shadow that never shuts up. But I also knew that without him, I'd only be half as strong.

Maybe, I often thought, one day I'll really kill him. Maybe he'll kill me. But today? Today we drink. Today we share the same jug, the same mother's son, the same earth's blood. Today we laugh while our scars burn. Today we are brothers.

And tomorrow we may be enemies again.

Chapter 13: Roman Camp: Wine, Olives – and Cowardly Dogs

The Roman camp was a joke, with walls all around it. Straight streets, tents in neat rows, as if you could plant trees with a ruler. Every stake stood at a right angle, every ditch dug like a mother sheltering her child from the rain. And that's exactly what it was: men who pretended to be warriors but couldn't bear the night without a wall of earth between them and the darkness. With us, you slept with your back against a tree, your sword on your stomach, and your dog by the fire. If you were lucky, you woke up in the morning. If you were unlucky, you were dead, and that was that. But with the Romans, even death had to be orderly.

The smell alone sickened me. There was wine fermenting sweetly like the breath of an old whore, and oil poured over flesh as if to anoint it, not eat it. And perfume. Romans stink of perfume. As if roses would help them if a spear pierced their stomachs. I swear, I've seen men who would rather save a flask of

oil than their comrade. We smelled of smoke, blood, horse, and earth. They smelled of cowardice hidden behind a sweet haze.

They ate in small bites. Tiny breads, olives that tasted like wet stones, cheese that smelled of a stable. One held a knife as delicately as a virgin, cutting his slices as if ritually carving the sun. I thought: If he ever had to gut a wild boar, he'd hold the intestines in his hand and weep. And they drank wine, but not from horns, not from jugs, not like men. No, they had silver cups, so small a child could drain them. And then they raised their fingers, as if drinking wine were a ritual by which one should die beautifully.

I saw them playing dice, in a circle, their eyes greedy like wolves around a dead sheep. They bet coins, pieces of metal that were worth more to them than blood. One lost, slammed his fist on the table, and everyone looked at him as if he'd crossed a line. With us? Whoever loses drinks, laughs, and hits back if he wants. But there? Silence. Only the crackling of the embers, and then the clacking of the dice again, cold as a senator's heart.

The women in the camp were ghosts. None of them laughed. Servants, slaves, carrying bowls, jugs, and cloths. Romans didn't even look at them, as if they were air with breasts. In our country, any one of them would have stolen a jug, slapped a man, and danced around the fire. But there? Nothing. Only downcast eyes, silent mouths, and trembling hands. Romans treat women like dogs, yet they themselves are the dogs. Chained by discipline, by fear, by rules no god has ever made.

I heard them talking, the officers who thought they were gods in leather armor. They talked about tactics, about roads, about supply routes. Words, words, words. No blood, no sweat, no fire. Just lines on maps, as if they could conquer the forest. I laughed aloud, and one looked at me, offended, as if I'd interrupted his prayers. I raised my tankard and said, "Drink like this, you bastards. Then talk about strength again." He turned away, of course. Romans can look at you like they're kings, but when they notice you're laughing, they tuck their tails between their legs.

At night, when the camp grew quieter, they could be heard murmuring. One never slept without a dagger under his head. Another tossed and turned as if haunted by a dream of barbaric shadows. They fear us, always. They don't build their walls against gods, nor against winter—they build them against us. We are their nightmare, dwelling in the trees. And they know it.

I felt their weakness like one feels a rotten tooth. Behind all the order, behind all the shining helmets, behind the stench of oil and wine, there was only one thing: fear. Fear that a scream in the night might be the last sound. Fear that a spear would fly over the wall. Fear that the ground itself would rip open beneath them and swallow them. We lived with this fear, we drank it, we fucked it, we laughed at it. But they made a system out of fear.

As I walked through this camp, I thought: This isn't a people of warriors. This is a herd that builds its own fences. They march because otherwise they'd stumble. They eat small bites because otherwise they'd choke. They drink small sips because otherwise they'd vomit. They talk, talk, talk because otherwise they'd have to hear how quiet it is when their own heart beats.

I swore to myself that night: All of this, this whole lying spectacle, will one day end in the mud. Their olives will swim in blood, their cups will fall into the dirt, and their walls will burn like any wood burns. Then we'll see how much perfume a man can still smell when his throat is slit.

And I drank, right in their midst, laughed in their faces, and they hated me for it. But they didn't dare do anything. Cowardly dogs, all of them.

Chapter 14: The Knife in the Darkness

The night was black, as if the sky had forgotten to light the stars. I lay on my fur, the mead still heavy in my stomach, my sword at my hand, as always. But something wasn't right. It was too quiet. No whisper from the trees, no crack of a branch, only the slow burning of the embers in the fire. I drew a breath through my nose and tasted earth, smoke—and something foreign.

Sometimes you just know before something happens. A jolt in your gut, a twitch in your neck that says: Awake. I kept my eyes closed, as if I were still asleep, but my heart was already pounding, faster than my breath. There was a step. Not a heavy one, not a clumsy one like a drunk, but a cautious one, trying not to give away the grass. Another. Closer. Then it stopped. I heard breathing, shallow, concentrated, so close I imagined it touching my skin.

Coldness settled on my neck. A knife. Thin, sharp, silent. I smelled metal, calling for blood. And in that moment, I knew: If I pretended to sleep even once more, I'd die. So I acted. I jerked my head back as hard as I could, heard a crack, a curse. The knife cut the skin on my neck, not deeply, but sharp enough that the

pain came like lightning. I rolled to the side, reached for the sword, but he was already upon me.

His weight flattened my chest, the knife searching for my stomach. I grabbed his wrist, both hands tight, and we wrestled as if we were animals in the dirt. Not a word, just growling, just breathing, just the sound of fingers fighting for life. I barely saw his face, just shadows, teeth, eyes glowing like coals. I smelled him: sweat, fear, a hint of cheap oil—not a Roman, but not one of us lying by the fire either.

I raised my knee, slamming it into his ribs. He groaned, the knife slipped, and I rammed my head against his forehead. It cracked, blood spurted, and he staggered back. I rolled free, got to my knees, and finally grabbed my sword. He came again, like a rat that knows it's going to die but still wants to bite. I didn't swing wide, I stabbed. Straight, deep, blindly. The blade struck flesh, cutting through as if he were nothing more than a sack of blood.

He gasped. A wet, bubbling wheeze that told me he didn't have much time left. He clung to my sword as if he wanted to keep it inside him. I pulled it back, slowly, hard, and he fell, his hands still outstretched, his knife still clutched, as if he'd forgotten he'd lost.

The night was silent again. Only my breath, my heart, and the dripping of blood onto the grass. I stood, staggering, looking down at him. A man. Not a stranger in shining armor, not a legionnaire with a helmet. One of us. Fur on his body, hair like ours, skin rough from the same wind. I didn't know who he was right away. But there was someone who knew me. Someone who knew where I slept, how I breathed, how I didn't move when the mead lay heavy in my veins.

I pulled him into the light of the embers, saw his face. Not a friend, not a brother—but one I'd seen around the fire, drinking, laughing, cursing. And now he lay here, dead, with a hole I'd made in him. I felt the cut on my neck, felt with my fingers, sticky, warm. A thin line, nothing that would kill me, but enough to remind me how close I'd been.

The others were still asleep. No one had noticed anything. I stood there, sword in hand, blood dripping, and I thought: If I wake them now, what will I say? That one of us put a knife to my throat? That treason lurks in our ranks? Or do I say nothing at all and let the body disappear like a bad dream?

I chose the truth, but not out loud. I dragged him out of the circle, away from the fire, into the woods. I left him there, among the trees, where the ground

was soft. Foxes would come, wolves perhaps, and he would disappear in pieces, like so many before him. When I returned, the fire smelled only of smoke again, not blood.

I sat down and drank the rest of my mug, my heart still pounding. I thought: This is how it will continue. Again and again, someone will find the knife in the darkness, because courage doesn't always fight openly, but sometimes stabs in the shadows. Friends, brothers, enemies—in the night, they are all equal. Anyone could carry the knife.

I lay down again, the sword directly in my hand this time. The cut on my neck burned, but it kept me awake. I stared into the darkness and knew: I wasn't alone. Even when everyone was asleep, the knife was always awake. And it waited, patiently, until darkness returned.

Chapter 15: Planning for Beer and Smoke

The smoke did what smoke always does when men pretend to be wiser than the morning: It crept into our hair, our tongues, our minds, until everything tasted of ash and yet remained sweet. They call it beer jokingly, as if that were a word anyone here should understand—but what's in our tankards is mead, thick and warm, honey that caresses the mind before gagging it. I held the cup, smelled it, didn't drink. Not today. Today, other people's tongues were supposed to run, and my head had to stand like a stake in a moor.

We didn't sit in a large circle. A large circle is good for lying and singing. Today I needed blades, not choirs. So we sat close around the small fire, which gave off only enough light to give faces edges. Hrodgar on the left, who never softens when asked. Bear on the right, whose silence is heavier than a tribune's armor. Lucra, with the wolf's cloak, opposite—eyes that smell plans before words are spoken. Sigar at the edge, young and too close to the embers because proximity makes him think he's already in the center. Behind me, the forest, which says nothing and retains everything.

I drew a line in the dust with a lump of coal. The ground is the best map: it fights back if you misread it. "Here," I said, "the ridge. There where the trees stand closer together than Romans can count marching blocks." I placed a flat stone on the line. "Here's the path where they think they're safe." I took three short sticks and lined them up. "Cohorts. Neat. Stupid. Hard to move when the forest touches them."

Hrodgar tipped the jug and let the mead flow brotherly down his own throat. "Tell me where we're going to hit, Arminius. I want to hit." "You always want to," I said, "that's why you're here. But today we're not going to hit until the third sign." "Third sign?" "Yes. First the wind. Then the fog. Then us."

Bear poked at the fire with a branch, making a few sparks dance, looking as if they were trying to reach the stars. "Fog comes when it comes. Wind too." "Exactly," I said. "That's why they'll think the gods are leading us. And if they believe that, they'll fight longer." He nodded, as if we'd just decided how many pigs we'd eat tomorrow.

I laid a piece of old leather in the dust. "Swamp. Not deep, but nasty. Anyone who goes in there with the sound of iron marching music will come out on softer feet—if at all." Lucra leaned forward, a shadow on shadow. "We'll guide them in." "We'll make them think the bottom's hard. A few boards, just long enough to keep the first five steps clear. Then nothing." Lucra grinned curtly. "And I'll hold down the rear. I need men who can stay quiet when they're loud." "Take the ones who've stolen before and survived," I said. "They can sneak and run in the same breath."

Sigar raised his hand like a boy at a sacrificial stone. "And me?" "You lead the dogs," I said. "Not ours. Our barking men. You keep the noise where it should go. Not too early, not too late." He nodded too eagerly. I gave him the look that says: Survive first, then nod. He only understood half of it, but that was enough.

I placed two pieces of bone as trees and laid small pebbles as rocks. "Here we stick horns. Deep under the leaves. When the pressure is on in front, the call comes from behind. They turn heads, necks stretch, and in the gap our steel grows." Hrodgar laughed. "I love gaps. Gaps are like women—when they're there, you shouldn't talk for long."
"You've been talking too long," said Bear. "I always talk to keep my hands busy when I'm not allowed to hit." "You'll be allowed to hit in a minute," I said. "But first, let's plan so carefully that even your hit will seem clever."

I sketched the withdrawal routes—there's no word I like less, yet it's the most useful. "This is where the wounded leave. This is where the water carriers come. This is where we fall back in case the forest has other worries today." "And if treason comes?" Lucra asked, without looking at my hand. The smoke changed direction, as if it had been listening. I pretended to just reload the coal. "Treason always comes. That's why we're sitting here on a small scale and not on a large scale." Bear glanced over at me briefly, a question mark that he

didn't finish. I let him. He'd heard what had happened during the night or smelled what was missing in the morning. Good men ask the right questions—usually silently.

We practiced quietly. No marching, no shouting. Just movement. I had them stand up, three steps, turn, two steps back, squat, stand, shield to shield, edge to edge, as if the earth's patience were at stake. The forest is a teacher who doesn't explain. It punishes. Two stumbled, one laughed until I looked at him. Then only the forest laughed, so quietly that the needles trembled.

"Signals," I said, drawing three short grooves in the dust. "One call—crow. Two calls—deer. Three—fire. No Roman trumpets, no gleaming horn. Only things the forest knows and therefore hides." Hrodgar raised an eyebrow. "And if a real crow calls?" "Then the forest has a sense of humor." Bear growled. "The forest never laughs. It waits." "Today it laughs," I said, "when we bring it something to eat."

I passed the jugs around, but I didn't drink. Sometimes sobriety is the only intoxication that keeps you alive. They talked themselves warm: Sigar about honor, Lucra about cunning, Hrodgar about force, Bear about the way back. I listened, counting the breaths between their words, looking for the places where men want too much. Too much is good for singing and bad for dying.

"Roads," I said, and the word tasted of stone. "They'll seek our paths. That's why we go where roads are useless." Bear nodded. "Hard things go hard. Light things go quietly."
"Romans are heavy," said Hrodgar. "And we are light—until we crash," said Lucra.

I looked into the small fire. It spoke the language everyone understands: crackling, hissing, breathing. I put the coal stub aside, grabbed a branch, and drew again, this time deeper, until the earth retained its grooves. To plan is to make traces in things stronger than you. If they remain, it's true. If not, you yourself become a trace.

"Who's holding the reserve?" asked Bear. "Me," I said. Hrodgar immediately protested. "You in front!" "No," I said. "The front isn't the leader's place today. The front catches fire, the rear decides the wind." Hrodgar wanted to try again, saw Bear's look, and kept his mouth shut. Sometimes silence lasts longer than a shout.

We talked about bread and water, about sinews and fat. Nobody sings songs about it, which is why men are more likely to lose from hunger than from blades. "Porters rotate," I said. "Two in front, two in back, always in the shadows. If you slip up, you're lying. If you whistle, you're lying." Sigar grinned. "I can whistle like a bird." "Then don't whistle at all tomorrow," I said.

I finally placed my hand on the earth. Warm from the fire, cold from the forest. "When the fog comes, patience begins. When the first wagon falters, time begins. When the horn calls from the ground, night begins. Even in the daytime." Lucra nodded, as if it were a prayer. Bear pushed the branch into the fire until flames consumed wood. Hrodgar stood as if he could slay waiting.

"The question remains," said Bear, and this time his silence was a word with bones, "who knows about it." "Only those sitting here," I said. "And those we kiss tomorrow in the darkness—with orders, not with honey." "And if someone..." "Then they're talking in the wrong direction, and the forest will hear them first." That was enough. Nothing more needed to be said, because we all still felt the knife in our necks from the last chapter.

A breeze, as thin as the breath of a dying calf, swept through the camp. Sparks jumped, a faint scent of wet earth drew nearer, as if the trees had decided to hate us no longer. I stood. "Rehearsal," I said. No drum. Just footsteps. We glided out, no chains, just threads that hold because everyone knows why they're hanging on. We practiced turning in the undergrowth: shield up, eyes down, feet flat. A branch broke, but only one. A curse fell, but only quietly. I memorized the quiet cursing. Quiet cursers are often the ones who survive.

Back at the fire, no one spoke aloud. The mead was passed around again, and this time I pretended to drink. The tongue quickly becomes honest when it thinks it's unobserved. I heard Hrodgar baring his teeth at the honey and threatening the morning. I heard Sigar speak of longing known only to pigs and glory. I heard Lucra count the wolf in the cloak—teeth, not hairs. I heard Bear say nothing, and therefore everything. And I didn't hear myself. That's good, just before the cut.

"How do you know when to start?" Bear asked without looking. "When the crows hold their breath," I said. "The crows never hold their breath." "Tomorrow."

We sealed nothing with grand gestures. Grandeur is noise. We didn't cut our hands—blood is too precious to feed the fire. We only nodded. Once, each of

us. That was the oath: a nod that remains when pitchers fall, trees crack, and men scream.

I sat there long after the others had disappeared. The smoke crept into my nostrils, clearing my thoughts, until only the line in the dust remained. Stones. Wood. Stains of leather. Pieces of bone. A plan is only worth something if it survives the kicks of the fools tomorrow. I pressed the lines deeper with the heel of my hand until the earth took them like secrets.

When I finally lay down, sword under my hand, I pushed the jug away. My mouth was dry, and that was a good thing. Sober mouths don't speak to dreams. I stared into the darkest spot between two trunks and said half-aloud: "Wind, fog, us." The forest answered as always: by refusing to answer. And the embers did what embers do when men think they've just tied the future to a string: They pretended to sleep—and waited for more wood.

Before sleep overcame me, I heard footsteps that didn't want to be secret. Bear checked the edges. Hrodgar lay down as if the ground were an enemy he would deal with tomorrow. Lucra counted what one is allowed to count at night: knives, men, possibilities. Sigar whispered something that sounded like a thank you to an animal that had never bitten him. And somewhere far away, a crow called. Just once. Then no more.

Morning would come as it always does: too early for words, just right for blades. But tonight, the world smelled of smoke and something bigger than us. Sometimes planning is just that: whispering in the ear of something bigger so it doesn't eat you tomorrow. I turned onto my side, pulled my knees up, and gripped the hilt tighter, as if trying to check the sword's pulse. It was steady. Mine wasn't. Good. A restless pulse finds its rhythm more quickly.

I slept without falling. And the plan remained in the ground, where it belongs when men in the morning pretend that chance is their god.

Chapter 16: Blood in the Rain – the first trick

The rain came as if the sky had swallowed itself and had to vomit it all up again. Not drops, but torrents that slapped our faces, chilled our skin, and tore the earth open until it begged for blood before it even came. I stood with my back against a tree trunk, my fingers on the hilt of my spear, and felt the water pulling the dirt from my hair. The men around me looked like animals that had

waited too long: eyes wide, mouths dry, muscles tense, as if they were about to snap before the enemy even came. The rain was our cloak, our shield, our god.

The forest was quieter than usual, so quiet that even the dripping became a drumbeat. Everyone knew things were getting serious, that no drinking, no jug, no stupid argument would end the day. Today, only blood and mud would extinguish the fire. I smelled iron even before it flowed.

The Romans came, heavy as ever. Their shields gleamed in the rain like dead fish, their armor clanged dully as water drowned the sound. They cursed, every step a curse, every footstep a stumble in the mud, and their chariots sank further than they intended. I saw their faces, those arrogant, oily grimaces, now twisted with wetness and anger. They hated the forest, they hated the sky, they hated everything that wasn't stone. I grinned. The forest hated them back.

I raised my hand. My men crouched lower. Their breathing was heavy, faster than time. One beside me chewed his beard, another repeatedly spat into the mud, as if he needed to empty himself before he could start. Even Hrodgar, who always laughed, was silent. That was the moment when your heart is waiting to leap and you wonder if it's about to beat louder or stop altogether.

Then the call. A crow, once, long and harsh. Then silence. Then the second call. The forest held its breath. I closed my eyes briefly, saw the picture we had painted in the smoke, and knew: Now.

The horn call came, deep, dull, from the earth itself. The Romans shuddered, their ranks twitched, shields raised. But the spears were already on their way. Dozens, hundreds. They flew like rain itself, only sharper. I heard the first crack, as wood strikes iron, then the even more beautiful crack as point touches flesh. A scream, high, short, ragged. Then another, deeper, longer, full of fear. And then many more.

We burst out of the undergrowth like wolves caged too long. I felt the mud beneath my feet, slippery but alive, as if it wanted to carry us. My men roared, screamed, laughed as they fell like an avalanche of blood and skin. Romans raised shields, tried to maintain order, but the rain swallowed their orders. A centurion shouted, but it was only a gurgle because a spear had opened his throat before he could finish his sentence.

I ran toward one of them, saw his face, young, smooth, like one who would have preferred to hold a wine cup in Rome. He trembled as he raised his shield.

I swung my sword, it slid over the rim, through his arm, blood splashing hotly into the rain, which immediately diluted it as if it were worthless. He fell, and I roared, not because it was necessary, but because otherwise the gods wouldn't hear.

Chaos was everywhere. Romans stumbled, bumped into each other, tried to regroup. But every tree was an enemy, every branch a spear, every drop of rain an ally of ours. One of them called out to Varus, but Varus was far behind, fat, with a full stomach, unable to imagine that the forest itself would swallow him.

Hrodgar leaped at a shield-bearer with an axe, striking until wood splintered, metal broke, and flesh gave way. He laughed as blood spurted in his face and yelled, "One more!" Lucra crept behind a wagon, cut the draft animals loose, and the Romans screamed as the animals bolted, dragging men into the mud. Bear pushed an entire squad into the swamp, where they thrashed like fish until they drowned.

I fought through, blow after blow, rain on my face, blood on my hands. A tribune came at me, his eyes full of hatred. He stabbed, I dodged, the rain deflected his point, and I struck from above, hard, until his helmet clanged and the skull beneath it gave way. He sank, I kicked him away as if he were just a sack of stones.

We were everywhere, they were nowhere. They tried to form lines, but the forest laughed at them. The ground swallowed their footsteps, the trees broke their lines, the rain muffled their voices. They cried for order, and we gave them only chaos.

I felt it, like a wave breaking: The first blow had landed. They staggered, they didn't understand what was happening. For them, this wasn't a war; it was a nightmare they couldn't awaken. For us, it was the beginning.

I raised my sword, dripping with rain and blood, and shouted, "This is only the first cut!" My men roared back, an echo louder than thunder. The Romans retreated, stumbling, their eyes wide, and I knew: many died today. But more importantly—today it began.

The rain continued to fall, as if trying to wash away the blood. But the ground greedily absorbed it all. And I knew: the forest would not forget.

Chapter 17: Teutoburg Forest - Fog, wetness, naked fear

The fog didn't just lie between the trees. It lay on us, inside us, in our teeth and tongues, a wet sheet that no one could peel off. I tasted moss and cold bark and the musty breath of the forest, which today didn't want to breathe, but wanted to hear. The ground squelched softly; every step was a secret conversation with the mud. I felt for the handhold with my fingers, which I had already tested a hundred times during the night, and repeated the same sentence over and over in my head: Breathe. Slowly. Count to four. Not too loudly. Not too long. The fog hears.

To my left, Hrodgar stood as still as a man like him could be. He didn't even grind his teeth. To my right, Bear, a wall with eyes as dark as the earth itself. Further ahead, Lucra, in his wolf's cloak, looked as if the forest had built him and then forgotten him. Behind me, Sigar, too close to my back; he smelled of old mead and fresh fear. "Don't cough," I whispered. "I never cough," he whispered, swallowing sounds that weren't there yet.

Before we saw the Romans, we heard them. No glamour, no fanfare rattle, just the old woe of leather, wood, iron, which became too heavy in the wet. A wagon wheel squealed briefly, as if wood could sweat. A voice spoke up, certain and empty: "Interval! Inter—" The fog took the second part from her and devoured it. I didn't grin. Today, no one grinned. Today was not the day for teeth. Today was the day for breath.

It sounded as if they were marching through cotton wool. Their shields slipped; last night's rain had remained in the fabrics, turning order into a plague. One stumbled over a root that all Romans had overlooked since the beginning. His mail thumped dully against his ribs. Somewhere in the rear, an optio called out; in front, no one called out. In front, they stared into the white, so close you could have reached out and grasped the air itself. Air like wet felt.

Our boards lay where they should have: five good steps, a promise, then nothing. I knelt, placed my fingers flat on the earth, and felt through my skin how the first wagon decided to believe us. Wood creaked. A horse reared, realizing too late that violence has no mercy when the ground ends. A dull thud, half water, half wood, and then that silence that follows, which only comes when many think: That wasn't me. Not yet.

"Not now," I whispered. "Pluck, don't cut." Hrodgar exhaled as if he'd learned to hate whispering. I raised my hand, and two spears flew from the white, as if they were drops the Godmouth had discarded. One was stuck in a shield, the

other in a man. You could hear the shield trying to hold the lie for a moment longer. Then it slipped. Voices precipitated, snapping in the middle. One prayed. Good. Those who pray no longer count.

Rolling trees. I love them because they're rude. Two ropes pretending to be roots in the fog. A tug from the right, a twitch from the left, and the trunks began to speak. It's a language of muffled syllables: Force. Momentum. End. The first trunk hit something that sounded like a helmet plume pretending to be iron. The second shot lower, taking shinbones with it that had no time to wonder. Metal called, wood answered, the fog didn't laugh—it just softened.

The Romans searched for their lines and found only trees. A centurion's voice tore open, the voice ripping through his throat; not of steel, but of the realization that words die in the fog like flies in honey. Two empty commands hung between us briefly, then fell like dead birds into the mud. A horn tried, dully, a sigh no one could interpret. They stood in lines no one could see and believed that order was a religion. The forest is pagan. It knows only pressure.

"Second plucker," I whispered. Lucra was already gone. You don't hear him, but you feel him. The scent changes when he's there—less human, more fur. He appeared where the second bag was waiting and turned a wagon into a legless animal. A rope pulled, an axle broke, and four men figured out how to pray under a wheel.

A legionnaire stumbled past me, so close I could see the saliva on his lips—a shining thread that knew no gravity in the fog. He didn't see me. He saw white, then gray, then fear. His fingers held the shield too high. I let him go. A gift to the fog, which later gave me others in return. Behind him padded a boy who hadn't yet learned to hate the lint. He muttered something about "mater." I thought briefly of our mothers and let him too. Today I was rich. I could afford mercy, so I could sell it for more money later.

"Third sign," said the forest. Not with crows, not with wind. With that pressure in the eardrums that comes when everything is on the right edge. I raised my hand, and our stones flew. Not big, not heroic. Hand-sized, honest. From above. Muddy enough not to announce themselves. Sometimes you don't need a spear, just a stone that knows where to go. Heads tilted. Teeth broke. One laughed briefly before realizing it wasn't him laughing.

Then I cut. Short, clean, not for the songs, but for the ground. One jump, one step, one blow. The man in front of me was an officer with clean fingers. Clean fingers are an insult in the forest. I showed him dirt: a handful, right in the eyes.

He raised his shield—too late, too high. My blade came from below, found the gap that all order leaves. A warm, dark, honest yes, his body said. I let him sink, stepped aside before he could place his thanks in my leg.

Hrodgar could no longer "pluck." He roared. I let him, but only for two heartbeats. "Back!" I hissed, and Bear was already standing where retreat isn't a word, but a space with room. We vanished like bad thoughts one doesn't want to talk about tomorrow. The fog took us away, the Romans held their breath for a moment, as if they had invented us. Then they shot. The first bolts stuck in trees, the second in their own backs. One man fell forward into a comrade, and both found themselves in a knot of metal and mistakes. I would have laughed if I hadn't learned to save laughter for mugs.

Sigar was going too fast. I felt it in the way the fog twitched behind me—like an animal raising its head too soon. A Roman knife ripped his tunic; his scream of skin was brighter than he intended. I grabbed him by the neck, yanked him back, the steel slicing past my forearm, and the pain burned like cold water. "Count," I hissed in his ear. "To four." He nodded, and this time I believed him.

The boards did what boards do: they gave up when it counts. The third wagon made the dive the first had prepared. Horses reared, men became legs, legs a burden. A shield slid over an edge, caught, and the man behind it hung with it. His fingers grasped at nothing and found mud. You can say a lot about what you learn in Rome. In the bog, you learn: grasping is praying without God.

I gave the signal for the second bag. A short shout—no animal, no human. A cracked word known only to us. To the right, a ridge of young trunks broke, the bases of which we had sawed off the day before. They didn't fall, they settled, polite as whips. A shield ring split in half. The core was bare. Lucra was already there, a sound of fur and steel. Three blows, none big, all right. A tribune tried to open his mouth and dropped his tongue instead.

"Breathe," I told myself, and did. The fog now tasted of iron. Not just the blood of the Romans. My own. The cut on my forearm dripped into my wrist, warm, comforting. Good. Your own pain is the body's best map. It shows you where you still are.

There were moments when I saw them too close: eyes that grew too wide; noses that turned white; lips that searched for words that don't grow here. A hand reached out to me, not as a blow, but as a plea. I am not the forest. I am not a god. I am Arminius. Sometimes I kick hands away so I don't become softer than I can afford. I kicked.

"Back!" Bear's voice, finally a word made of stone. We swung back into the trees, like fish not yet in the net. The Romans pushed shields before them as if they were doors that could be closed. The forest has no doorframes. I heard an optio poke at the ancient syllables that move legions: "Ad—coh—form—" He choked on the third.

It became quieter. Not calmer. Quieter is worse. Quieter means the fog is getting full. A horse whimpered; it's a sound no child should be subjected to. A man wept, quietly, without shame. Romans weep like men when no one is looking. I watched. I remember everything that makes them human, because it shows the spot where you still press.

"Enough for now," I said, and the forest didn't nod, but it listened. We retreated deeper into the gray, so far that the shouts became rumors. Behind us remained a column that was no longer one. In front stood trees that had done a good job today. I stroked the bark of a trunk, the way you pat a horse's flank. "No eating yet," I whispered. "Just nibbling."

We gathered at the place we called "Skin": a ravine with leaves pretending to be nothing more than leaves. One of us rinsed his face with water from a hollow that had been earth yesterday. Hrodgar breathed like bellows, grinning toothlessly. "Too little," he said. "Later," I said. "Later will be a lot." Bear pursed his lips, nodded once. Lucra counted again. Sigar held his arm, not mine, his own; the cut was small, the boy had grown.

I listened. The fog has a second voice when it gets tired: it makes the drops fall harder. Each drop was a clock. I counted. After a hundred drops, I heard the iron talking again. Not sure, not loudly. That was good. He who speaks the second no longer believes in the first. They tried to lift wagons, count men, find directions. The forest showed them four directions: Forward into mud. Backward into fear. Left into trees. Right into us. It's unfair, they never said, because they would have used words the fog doesn't like.

We went forward once more. Not to cut—to remind. Two spears, three stones, a rolling boom that only did what gravity told it to. It was enough to break what had just become a line back into points. An officer poked around in the white for us and found a tree trunk. He shouted at the tree. I almost answered him.

When we finally withdrew, it was as if we were pulling a blanket over a body that had just realized it was cold. Behind us remained the clinking, turning into cold. Ahead of us waited the space where one could breathe again. I raised my arm, let it fall. No cheering. No clattering. Just breath, learning to count again.

"The forest no longer has its mouth shut," I said quietly. "And we're keeping it open." Hrodgar was about to say something harsh, but Bear placed a hand on his shoulder. Lucra looked past me into the white that remained there, as if it were a wall with ears. Sigar looked at his trembling fingers and finally stilled them by clenching them into fists.

We went deeper into the trees, where the fog was thinner and the world had outlines again. Behind us, the white crept down the slope, pretending to be harmless. I stopped briefly, placed my hand flat on the ground. Warm. Not from the fire. From blood and the rubbing of many boots that forgot what earth was. I raised my hand again, smelled it. Iron, rain, bark. "Good," I said. "It's beginning."

When we reached the camp, the fire did what fire always does when men return, unsure whether they've won: It pretended it had been waiting for us. I didn't sit down. I didn't drink. I looked into the embers and, instead of sparks, saw only dots in the mist. Each dot was a man who thought he could still walk. Some walked. Many didn't.

The night smelled of wet furs and the sound of blades that stays in your ears when no more strikes are heard. Hrodgar slept with his mouth open, as if he could suck in the mist once more and chew it up in his dreams. Bear sat as Bear sits: as if his back were a wall no one can get around. Lucra disappeared into the place where shadows make sense. Sigar lay awake, pretending to sleep. I lay down, my sword at my stomach, and the forest lay down beside me, cool and awake.

"Blood in the rain was the first prank," I said to the fur that smelled of yesterday. "Tomorrow the white will taste of fear." The forest didn't answer. The fog did: It crept into my nose, cold and friendly, like a confidant who knows he'll need me again tomorrow. I closed my eyes and still saw everything I didn't want to see. That's the price. We'll pay it as long as the forest gives us credit.

And he still gives us.

Chapter 18: How to Crush Legions

Legions aren't gods. They only pretend. In truth, they're loaves of bread. Big, heavy, hard loaves. You can't bite into them in one bite; you'll break your teeth. You have to wet them first. Soften them. Then you press on them from all sides

until they tear. That's all. No magic, no Jupiter, no stupid eagles. Just pressure, time, and a little patience.

We had the patience. So did the forest.

The Romans marched as they always march: straight, stupid, blind to anything that wasn't stone. They held their shields high, as if they could protect them from the sky. The sky laughed at them. The ground squelched, every step half a coffin. And yet they ran into our mouths anyway, because they didn't know any better.

We had already sawed through the trees on the left. For a long time. With quiet blows, so that they stood like tired men, just waiting for a pat on the shoulder before finally falling over. On the right, we had built walls of branches, mud, and stones, disguised as hills. Ropes were strung from above, which only needed a tug. In front, we blocked them with rubble. In the back, we waited.

The legion ran in. One, two, three cohorts, well behaved, shields across their chests, spears in hand, heads in the rain. Then came the signal. A whistle. Two jerks. The trees fell, one after the other, with a sound so honest that it made it clear to everyone: There is no escape today.

The forest itself closed the door.

Logs fell to the left, stones rolled to the right, and the ground shook in front. The Romans stood like cattle in a pen, and we were the men with the sticks. They shouted, they screamed, they tried to impose order. But order has no place when the walls are closing in on you. They collided with each other, shoulder to shoulder, chest to back, breath to breath, until no one could swing anymore.

We shot spears from above, dropped stones. Every hit was a blow to the dough. The mass went to its knees, got up again, fell again. One raised his shield, the next rammed him from behind. An optio yelled orders, and the man behind him rammed the spear into his kidneys—not out of courage, but because he had no room to hold his arm.

There was a cracking, a crushing, a breaking. Bones gave way like rotten wood. Men screamed, not because they were dying, but because their ribs were breaking under the weight of their comrades. They were crushing each other. We didn't even have to do everything ourselves—they did it for us.

I jumped in, on the side where the fog was thinner. Mud up to my knees, blood warm up to my ankles. A tribune saw me, raised his sword, but he couldn't swing. I thrust, short, close, he fell, and three more fell on top of him. I kicked them away like you kick logs.

Hrodgar roared, hacked, laughed. His axe slashed into backs, into helmets, into everything that moved. He didn't sing. Today was not a song day. Today was a milling day. Bear pushed his shoulder against a group that thought they could break through. They rebounded like waves against rocks. Lucra cut in the rear, where the fleeing men thought there was air. There was only steel.

The screams grew muffled as throats ran out of air. Men turned blue before blades even reached them. Panic is the best ally—it kills faster than we can. I saw one man dig his fingers through a comrade just to have room to breathe. I saw him snag the other man's eye in the process. It was a good cut. Accidental.

We pressed on, ever on. Spears from the front, stones from above, axes from the sides. The cauldron was bubbling. Legions that had shone in Rome were turned to mush here. And I said to myself: This is how it's done. This is how you crush legions. No hero, no great battle. Just wood, stone, hunger, and pressure.

When we retreated, because even the forest was satiated, all that remained was a heap of iron, flesh, and mud. They were still breathing, some. Some were praying. Some were crawling. But the Legion was no longer a legion. It was a mass. And mass doesn't fight. Mass rots.

I stood at the edge, looked down, felt the rain sweeping the dirt from my face. I raised my sword, but didn't wipe it. It was dripping, it was meant to be dripping. My men were silent. Only the crows were already calling, as if they'd already received the invitation.

“That’s how it’s done,” I said. And the forest nodded, slowly, with wet branches.

Chapter 19: Varus' last words – and my laughter

The forest was suddenly silent, as if it knew something great was about to fall into the dirt. No bird, no wind, only the dripping of water on wet bark. And then I heard it: the neigh of a horse, a crash, a cry, dull and fat like the body

that had struck him. Varus had fallen. Not with a hero's stride, not in a charge, but like a sack full of grain that took the wrong wagon.

He lay there in the mud, his armor as heavy as a wall, his belly pressed forward, his arms flailing like a drowning child. His helmet was askew, his face glistening with sweat and rain. This was the man who wanted to bring order to Germania. A wet lump in the dirt.

"Form up! Form up!" he roared, but his voice was hollow, like a bottomless jug. No one heard. No one wanted to. His officers shouted at each other, one moved to the right, one to the left, shields clashed, and in the middle, a horse trampled on a man who was a Roman like the rest of them. Order? There was only stench and panic.

I approached. The men behind me remained silent, wanting to see what I would do. Varus rolled onto his side, his mouth full of mud, his eyes wide, as if he had finally seen that heaven wasn't Roman. I stood over him, sword in hand, and he gasped. His lips searched for words, like an old drunkard seeking the last drop.

"Arminius..." he stammered. "You... you are a Roman... you are—"

I spat into the dirt next to him. "I was. But I washed the stench off. It never left you."

He wanted to say something, words of Rome, words of duty, words of justice. But all that came out was a whine, thin, childish. His hand reached for me, as if he could bring me back into his fold. I kicked his hand away, hard, and he whimpered.

Then I laughed. Loud, dirty, rude. A laugh that came from my gut, mixed with mead and blood. I laughed because this man, who wanted to control us, was now wheezing like a pig dying in the mud. I laughed because he thought words could save him, while the forest was already devouring his name.

His last words weren't a command, nor a threat. Just a wheezing: "Mother..." Then he turned his eyes away, searching for a heaven that didn't answer. Perhaps he stabbed himself with the sword, perhaps he simply fell over—I don't know for sure. I only know: when he left, he was small.

I stood there, with blood on my hands, rain on my face, and laughed again. I laughed so that the forest could hear it, so that the men could hear it, so that

even Rome would hear it someday. Not because it was joy. But because it was true: Varus was dirt, and he had remained in the dirt.

Behind me, the men cheered, but I raised my hand. "Silence," I said. "Let the crows sing." And they sang.

So Varus died. Without greatness, without glory. And my laughter echoed over him like thunder over a dead tree.

Chapter 20: Roman Bones in the Mud

The rain eased. The fog retreated like a thief with a full purse. And what it left behind was the face of battle—naked, exposed, stinking. Everywhere they lay, the masters of the world, now mere heaps of flesh in the mire. Legions that had marched out of Rome in splendor now lay like cattle that had perished in the mud.

The smell came first. Not just blood. Blood is fresh, blood can smell sweet. Here, there was more: stomach contents steaming from slashed bellies; burnt hair because a wagon had ended in fire; shit because men had lost control in their deaths. Everything mingled with rainwater that ran into every wound, as if trying to spread it evenly.

I walked through this field, step by step. The ground was no longer ground, but a soft bed of bodies and shields. Every step made an arm wobble, a helmet tip, a skull buckle. Some Romans still stared, their eyes wide open, like puppets who didn't understand the game was over. Others were barely human anymore—just lumps where armor and skin clung together.

Hrodgar laughed. He pulled a dead man's sandal off and held it up as if it were a trophy. "Roman fashion!" he roared. Some laughed along, others choked. One of my younger men turned away and vomited into the mud. The mud took it as it took everything.

Bear was silent, as always. He walked, treading no harder than necessary, but looking at each body with dark eyes, as if counting them. Maybe he was. Maybe he wanted to know the number. I didn't. Numbers are for Romans. We have images.

And the images were powerful. A man was hanging halfway from a wagon wheel, the spear still in his mouth, as if he'd never learned to keep his mouth shut. Another had slipped into the moor, only his hand sticking out, stiff as a branch. Two lay entwined, sword in chest, dagger in stomach—no one knew who had killed whom. A third grinned, because the dead sometimes pretend to laugh.

Lucra pulled the coat off an officer. "Nice and warm," he said, putting it on. The dead man stared at him, eyeless. Sigar squatted next to a centurion who was still gasping for breath. He held out water, let him drink, then slit his throat. No hatred, no triumph. Just order, like putting an animal down.

I saw Varus again. He was just one of many. No crown, no glow. Just a fat body in the dirt, half trampled by horse hooves, half drenched in rain. His last words no longer hung in the air. Only the smell of fear. I no longer laughed. It was over.

The crows were already there, cheeky, hopping, pecking. They tugged at eyes, tongues, and fingers. A raven sat on a helmet and looked at me as if it knew this was its celebration, not mine. Wolves howled at the edge. They would wait until night came.

One of my men found the Roman eagle. It lay in the mud, its golden sheen smeared, its feathers covered in dirt. He held it up, cheering. I nodded. "Put it down," I said. "It belongs in the mud, too." The man hesitated, then threw it back. The symbol of Rome splashed like any other bone.

I bent down and picked up a bone—an arm, cleanly severed, the fingers still half-curved. I held it up, turned it, looked at it. Then I threw it back into the mud. "That's where you belong," I said. My voice sounded rough, broken. Maybe from smoke, maybe from laughter that had already burned away.

That was victory: Roman bones in the mud. No song, no glory. Only the forest, standing silently, and us, still breathing. It is never more. It must not be less.

Chapter 21: The Ravens and the Leftovers

Morning didn't come with fanfare. It came with wings. A black flock flew over the forest, as if the night had forgotten to dissipate. The sun tried to pierce the

fog, but the ravens were faster. They swooped down, loudly, greedily, impudently, and landed on what remained of proud Rome.

The first to go for the eyes. Always the eyes. They pecked them out like children picking berries. The whites of the Romans' eyes splattered, slid, disappeared. Then came the tongues. Those that had shouted orders yesterday now hung limply, and the ravens ripped them out, stretching them until they broke. One fluttered away with a tongue in its beak, like a red ribbon. I laughed. Not out loud. Just deep inside.

The crows were bolder. They hopped over chests, pecked holes, and crawled inside. All one could see was their wings flapping, and when they resurfaced, water dripped from their beaks. Sometimes they fought, two or three on a wound, fluttering and squawking, while the dead Roman had nothing left to oppose them.

Hrodgar roared with laughter. "Look at those vultures! They know what's good!" He hurled a stone at a carrion bird, missed, and the bird croaked back in offense. Some of our younger men made the sign against the evil eye. For them, ravens were messengers of the gods. I just nodded. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps those black bastards were bringing the message to Rome: Your men are now fodder.

A Roman, half-naked, lay there with his stomach open, his intestines spilling out. A raven stood in the warm pile, pecking its fill. I stepped closer and watched as he tore out a piece as if it were a loaf of bread. I didn't feel sick. I just thought: This is how order ends. Not in marble, but in mud.

The flags were no better off. A remnant of purple cloth hung in the bushes, dirty and torn. A bird tugged at it as if it were trying to build a nest. Perhaps it was. Rome's eagle, golden yesterday, lay in the mud, and a black raven sat on it, croaking and pecking at its beak. I couldn't have painted a better picture.

Some of my men gathered shields, swords, and rings. Others stood still and just watched. One vomited again, this time into the leaves. I let him. Not everyone can eat the forest. Some have to first understand that it always eats back.

I continued walking, stepping over corpses, through pools of blood that were already darkening. A helmet rolled beneath my foot, and beneath it grinned a skull, half exposed, half still flesh. I didn't pick it up. I'd seen enough.

"This is how Rome ends," I said quietly. "Not with thunder. With picking."

The ravens didn't hear me. Or maybe they did. One fluttered up, circled above my head, and dropped a drop of blood, right onto my shoulder. I didn't wipe it away. I carried it. As a sign that the forest had accepted us today.

As we moved on, the birds stayed. Their cawing echoed through the trees, louder than any horn, more honest than any song. They weren't singing a heroic song. They were singing that meat is meat, whether Roman or Germanic. And that the leftovers always belong to the ravens.

So we left them behind—the legions, the eagles, the bones. The forest would manage them. The ravens would do the rest. We had done what we had to do. Now the forest did what it always does.

The Ravens and the Remnants. That was victory.

Chapter 22: The Feast After the Massacre

We came home like men who had stolen the sky. Women screamed, children ran, the elderly nodded, as if they knew it was bound to happen. But no one remained silent. The entire tribe roared, danced, and beat drums as if trying to drown out the thunder. We carried no eagles, no flags. We carried blood on our hands and stories on our tongues.

The fire burned high. Pigs turned on the spit, dripping fat splashed into the flames, and the smoke mingled with the stench of sweat and victory. Someone brought barrels of mead, as big as children, and we clinked them together until they burst and the stuff flowed in streams. Horns passed from hand to hand, no one asked if there was anything left in them. There was always something left.

I sat at the edge, sword beside me, horn in hand. My throat was raw, my throat burned, but the mead flowed, and I drank until I no longer knew whether my belly was full of blood or honey wine. The men sang. First songs of victory, then songs of women, then just roars that no one understood.

Hrodgar suddenly stood naked on the table, horn in one hand, axe in the other, and screamed, "I'll fuck Jupiter himself!" Everyone laughed, someone threw a piece of meat at his head, he bit into it, blood ran down his chin, and he continued to roar. Lucra fought with another over a horn until they both lay laughing in the dirt, and the women hooted.

There were no boundaries. One vomited into the fire, and the flames hissed. Another slept in the pig trough, his face covered in fat, but snoring as if he'd won. Two men fought until both bled, then they lay arm in arm, like brothers. A woman knocked a horn out of a man's hand, drank it dry herself, and laughed in his face.

I drank, I laughed, I sang. But I also saw. I saw victory drowned in mead, how men who had just broken Roman bones now lay in the dirt like pigs. I saw the children watching with open eyes as their fathers exposed themselves, as their mothers danced with smeared faces.

An old man came to me, placed his hand on my shoulder, and smelled of smoke and ash. "Well done," he said. "But remember: every victory is just a feast. Tomorrow you'll have to fight again." I nodded and drank, but his gaze lingered, even after he'd already left.

The night grew louder, darker. Flames blazed, shadows danced. Men ran naked around the fire, women screamed, children laughed, and the forest watched. Ravens sat above, silent, as if they'd already had enough.

I stayed until the horns were empty, until my legs went weak, until my head pounded like drums. Then I lay down in the dirt, my back against a tree trunk, my sword beside me. I saw the stars, blurry, and thought: This is what victory looks like. Full of mead, full of vomit, full of laughter. But never still. Never enough.

I laughed one more time before I fell asleep. Loud, hoarse, dirty. Because I knew: tomorrow, blood would flow again. But today, the mead flowed. And that was enough.

Chapter 23: The Romans are coming back – and so are we

The morning after the feast tasted of ash and sour mead. Men lay in the dirt, women snored beside extinguished fires, children crawled among bodies that didn't know whether they were still alive or already dead. The forest was silent, but not peaceful—it waited, as we all waited, unknowingly.

Then the messenger came. Mud up to his hips, blood on his arm, his eyes wide, like someone who'd seen more than he could stomach. He gasped, almost

falling over, and his first words weren't greetings, weren't pleasantries. They were: "They're coming."

Silence. Not because we didn't understand, but because we understood immediately. Of course. Rome doesn't lie there like a beaten dog. Rome sends new dogs. Always.

Some laughed, dryly and bitterly. "Let them! We'll kill them again!" One yelled, "We ate their eagles, we'll eat their children too!" But the voices were too loud, too fast. That was fear in disguise. I knew that.

I stood up, my head heavy with the mead, my tongue dry as sand. I looked at them all, the warriors who still had blood on their hands, but beads of sweat on their foreheads. "Listen," I said, and my voice was rough, but it held. "Of course they'll come back. Rome always comes back. Rome is like a rat—if you kick off its tail, another one grows back. If you kick off its head, ten more rats will come. That's how it is. But we are the forest. And the forest never ends."

They nodded, some reluctantly, some with clenched fists. We all knew what that meant: no end. No "victory" like in the songs. Just a cycle. They come, we kill. They come, we kill again. And someday we'll lie in the dirt, and our sons will take our place.

We gathered the weapons that were still usable. We sharpened swords, we bound shields, we sewed armor from what we had ripped from the Romans. Women gave us water, mead, sometimes just a look that said, "Stay alive." Children played with helmets that had protected heads yesterday. The forest was our forge, our camp, our god.

Some murmured, whispered. "What if they come more this time? What if they burn what we have?" I heard it, but I let them. Fear is a tool if you use it correctly.

I stood by the fire, raising the sword, still caked with blood. "Hear me," I cried. "We have broken them once, and we will again. For they will come again, yes—but so will we."

A roar, not as loud as after the battle, but more honest. A roar that came from throats that knew there was no end. Only the next one.

The sun was setting, and the ravens were still flying over the remains. They knew it too. That this dance wouldn't stop. Romans were coming. Germanic tribes too. And the forest will always be here to watch.

Chapter 24: Alliances with Bastards

We rode through the forest, and I already knew it would be worse than any battle. Killing Romans was easy. Back then, you knew where up was from down, who was enemy and who was friend. But here, in this crowd of tribes, chieftains, and so-called allies, everything was gray, full of slime and distrust. Each of them was a bastard, and each wanted more for themselves than they were willing to give. I rode with gritted teeth, as if I were stepping into a nest of snakes.

The meeting place was in a large clearing. Fires burned everywhere, large and loud, and each tribe tried to stoke the biggest fire to show the others: Look, we are the most powerful. The smell of meat, of burnt fat, of beer and mead hung everywhere. Women bustled about, children screamed, dogs bit each other's ears, and the men sat with horns in their hands, spitting words that sounded like threats. It was a market, but not for goods—it was a market for honor, power, and betrayal.

I stepped inside and immediately felt the stares. Some looked at me with respect, others with envy, and some with pure hatred. I knew they would shake my hand now and plunge their blades into my back tomorrow if it suited them. Bastards. All of them.

There was the first: Segestes, that old dog who had signed more treaties with Romans than he'd emptied horns. He came toward me, broad-shouldered, smug, with an air as if he had the gods themselves in his bag. "Arminius!" he cried, as if we were brothers. His voice dripped with honey, but his eyes flashed coldly. "We must stand together." I shook his hand, coldly, firmly, and thought only: I'd gladly slit your throat right now. But not today. Today I need your men.

Then came Gernot of the Bructers. A pig of a man, with arms like tree trunks but a head as empty as an old jug. He laughed loudly, always too loudly, and he only fought after he'd smelled enough meat. "Arminius!" he roared, "where's the mead? I'll fight when I'm full!" I nodded, let him scream, and knew: Men like that are like dogs—give them a piece of meat, and they'll follow you. But let them starve, and they'll rip your throat out.

And there was that sneak, Marbod, the king of the Marcomanni, finely dressed, proud, with a tongue sharper than any sword. He always acted as if he were too refined for the filth we lived in. He talked of "order" and "structure"—as if

we'd ever had a taste for Roman words. I hated him, but I also knew that if I had him against me, it would be a second enemy behind the lines. So I pretended to listen to him while mentally burying his face in the mud.

We sat down by the large fire. Horns were passed around, pieces of meat were tossed around, and the shouting began. One yelled, "We've won the greatest victory, so give us half the spoils!" Another yelled back, "You were too late, we already slaughtered the Romans while you were still cleaning your asses in the forest!" It didn't take two horns before the first few started fighting. Fists flew, one fell into the fire, jumped back out, screamed that he would kick Jupiter himself in the ass, and everyone laughed.

I drank. A lot. Because mead was the only language these bastards understood. Every sip was a contract, every belch a seal. I raised my horn and shouted, "You want honor? Your honor stinks of pork fat and fear! You want to fight? Then fight Rome, not each other!" Some cheered, others grumbled. One threw a piece of bone at my head; I just laughed, picked it up, and hurled it back. It hit him in the ear, and he grinned like he'd won a prize.

Then one of them stood up, tall and broad, with a horn in his hand and a dagger in his belt. "Arminius," he said, "you think you're the lord of the forest, but without us you're nothing. We'll only fight if we can take the Roman women first." Laughter, jeers, whistles. I stood up and faced him. Not a word. Just a look. He saw I meant it. I could have plunged my sword into his stomach right then and there. But he saw in my eyes that if he said another word, I would do it in the next breath. He sat down. Silently. And that was exactly how it had to go.

So the night went. Talking, shouting, threatening, laughing. Always on the edge of the fight, always in the stench of flesh and smoke. And I knew: These are the men with whom I want to break Rome. Bastards, cowards, drunkards, liars. But they had weapons. And weapons count more than words.

In the end, we swore. Not on parchment, not on seals, but on blood and mead. One cut his hand, the next imitated it, and soon the fire was dripping red from the oaths. We drank, we shouted, we laughed, we butted horns, and none of us truly believed it would hold. But for today, it held.

When I later stepped out into the night, the clearing stank of smoke, burnt flesh, and betrayal. I stood there, looked up at the sky, saw the stars laughing above us, and just thought: Bastards. All bastards. But bastards with swords. And better bastards at your back than Romans at your neck.

Chapter 25: Women who kill more than men

When I think of war, I first see men: swords, shields, blood in the mud. But if I'm honest—and I am today, with the horn in my hand and the smoke in my throat—then I say: Men kill, yes, but women kill better. And worse.

After the battle, when the men returned home, vomiting and staggering, it was the women who drew their knives. Not against us, but against what was left. They cut the arrows from our ribs, rubbed herbs into our wounds that burned more than any sword. And as they did so, they told stories—of Romans they had strangled with their bare hands, of enemy women whose hair they had torn out in a fight until blood flowed.

I remember a widow named Albrun. The Romans had impaled her husband; his head was still on the stake when she found him. She didn't scream, she didn't cry. She waited. A week later, she lured a group of Roman scouts into her hut. She smiled, gave them mead, gave them bread—and when they were full, she took the axe she used to split wood and split skulls. One by one. They say she laughed as she did so, a laugh that children could hear for months. Afterwards, she went into the forest, covered in blood, sat down, and sang. When I heard about it, I thought: Yes, this is how Rome really dies. Not by legions, but by a woman with an axe.

And then there were the quieter ones. The ones with the herbs, the witches, who mixed poisons that slowly seeped into the stomach. I saw a Roman messenger die for three days because a woman on the road had offered him water. "He should die slowly," she had said. And he died slowly. So slowly that he had time to think about every damned Roman law that had sent him there.

At the feasts, the women were no less cruel. Once, I was standing by the fire, horn in hand, and saw a man take a piece of meat from a woman's plate. She grinned, took the horn from him, drank it all, and when he laughed, she rammed her knife into his shoulder. "Don't ever take anything from me again," she said. And he kept laughing, because he was drunk, until he passed out. Everyone cheered, she sat down, and continued drinking as if nothing had happened.

Sometimes they mocked us men. "You run into the woods, swing your swords, and think you're heroes. We keep your children alive. We keep your shit

together. And if necessary, we'll kill. We just don't talk about it much." Then they laughed, and we laughed too, because we knew they were right.

My mother was like that, too. She didn't teach me to fight, but to be silent. "A man who talks too much dies quickly," she said. I don't think I learned that, because I still talk too much to this day. But I saw her once silence a man with just a look—and he never came back to our house.

Women don't kill like men. Men make noise, hit, yell, show their scars. Women are silent, precise, deadly. They kill with a knife in your sleep, with a herb in mead, with a word that pierces you harder than a spear. And sometimes they kill you by keeping you alive, stuffing your belly with shame, and letting you walk on as if you were already half dead.

We men think we're the wolves. But women are the crows. And the crows are always there when the meat is tender.

So yes—we defeated Rome, we destroyed legions. But the ones who made sure we could fight at all were women. Women who kill more than men.

And believe me: I'm more afraid of an angry German woman with a chef's knife than of ten Roman swords.

Chapter 26: Mead, Murder and Misunderstandings

The smoke hung so low that you didn't see faces until you were already offended. Three circles of fire, three leaders, three times as many egos as knives. Horns wandered, laughed, toppled. The wood cracked as if the forest itself had an opinion and refused to speak it. They called it an "alliance." I called it: a house of straw where everyone already holds a torch.

On the left, the Bructeri, loud, red-faced, with meat grease in their beards. On the right, the Chatti, quieter, harder, with eyes like wet stone. Ours sat in the middle, as if we were the cork keeping the barrel from exploding. Above everything, the buzzing of mosquitoes murmured, mingling with the men's laughter and the short, dry coughs of those stumbling from revelry to war.

"Boar!" roared one of the Bructerians, a giant of a man with shoulders like bridge girders. It was their watchword for the Night's Watch. Too bad Wulfgar, a Cheruscan with too short a thread of patience, understood "Honor!" – in a

tone that could have meant "Your honor stinks!" He stood up, tipped the horn to the ground, and approached the Bructerian without a word. I saw two lives about to be cut short, and before I could say "no," the first fist landed. It sounded like a wet sack on wood. The Bructerian toppled over, laughed, stood up again. Wulfgar grinned. A circle formed around them, as always when men believe fate needs an audience.

"Boar!" the Bructerer repeated, more clearly, both hands raised. "Honor," Wulfgar growled, "can you—" I intervened, placing the flat of my hand in his chest. "He says boar, not honor." Wulfgar blinked. "Then he still meant it wrong." I raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps. But now you drink with him, or I'll count your teeth and sort out the nice ones." Wulfgar grumbled, took the new horn I handed him, and clinked glasses with the Bructerer. Two blows later, they were laughing at the same stupid joke. Misunderstandings, I thought, are like sparks in hay. Today I blow. Tomorrow the forest burns.

Behind us, one of the Chatti boasted a Roman cloak. Dark red, dirty, still with gold thread along the hem. It was prey, and prey here is a second name for "I am more important." The man swung the cloak, let it fly, caught it again, and the laughter all around was that laughter men make when they think seriousness is on holiday. I saw Sigar, our boy, his gaze narrowing the further the cloak swung. From the side came the very mistake that writes history: a second Chatti wore the same cut of cloak, but in murky gray—one of our own had given it to him to irritate him. And in the smoke, gray looked like black, and black looked like the night in the Roman soul.

"Scout," someone hissed. "Scout!" The word has legs. It ran through all three circles in less than a breath. Sigar heard only half, but twice as loudly. He leaped, faster than his mind, and his blade was that excitable animal that hasn't yet learned to wait. The Greycloak turned, mouth open for "I—," and the rest of his sentence became blood, staining the cloak where there had been only smoke. It was quiet, as real deaths often are. Just a truncated groan, a short metallic clang, then you saw the knees, no longer knowing what they were for.

Sigar stumbled back, looked at the blade as if it had betrayed him. I was already there, kneeling, turning my body. Not a Roman scout. A messenger. My messenger. One of the quiet ones, who walk more than talk. On the inside of his arm, he had the knotted band that only our porters wear. I raised my arm, showing the band. The air became heavy. Where laughter had once hung, there was now the kind of silence the gods like because they can breathe between them.

The first Bructerians hissed, hands clenched into fists. "Blood price!" one shouted. "He was lying in our circle, so your boy owes us something!" A Chatt spat into the fire. "Blood is blood, price is price. What burns, burns." Wulfgar gritted his teeth. "If you open your mouth, I'll feed the embers with your teeth." I stood, slowly, my hand over the blade, not to threaten—to remind. "Blood price," I said calmly, "we pay. But for one of ours, killed by ours? I set the price, not you. Otherwise, we'll soon have three prices for the same death."

"Your boy stung," the Bructerian pressed. "Your pride blinded him," I replied. "And your smoke blinded him." A few laughed nervously. I raised my hand. "Two cows. Two knives of Roman steel. And one of us will accompany your watch tomorrow. Two are supposed to be wrong-sighted, so one can strike the other before it stings again." The Bructerians murmured, calculating. One held up three fingers, then two, then one, then nodded. The Chatt raised his horn. "And your boy?" I looked at Sigar. "He's alive," I said. "And he'll carry the body to the edge of the forest. We'll lay him where the messengers pass, so he knows he hasn't run in vain." A few nodded. Someone spat in the dust, as if it were a seal. I bent down and stroked the dead man's eyelids. He hadn't talked much in his life. Even now he kept things close.

We laid the man on a greasy canvas stretcher. Sigar took hold, his face both blank and far too full. I walked in front, and as we pushed, a small bell rang somewhere. Bright, bold, a dancing metal note. The storm bell. It usually lay in a leather pouch near the horns. There are only two reasons to ring it: assault or arson. Unfortunately, there's a third reason, one that has to do with loot and is stupidity. Someone had hung the bell on their belt like jewelry and wanted to show it off. They pulled it—and the night grew ears.

"Alarm!" yelled one. "Prey!" cheered another. Alarm hunters ran to the left. Prey drinkers ran to the right. In the middle, they collided like two bulls not recognizing each other in a mirror. Fists, horns, elbows, and in three heartbeats, blades were in the air again. I spun so fast my vertebrae grated, shoved the stretcher into an old man's hand. "Stop." He stopped. I jumped into the middle, where blood was already dripping—not much yet, but enough for the ground to remember the taste.

"Put down your weapons!" I yelled. Most listened, except for those who never listen. One of them was Hagan, a bastard who always used the words "if" and "but" in alliances and accepted only the biggest pieces of meat as reward. He grinned the way only someone who believes the night is his advocate can. "Why put down?" he said, and I saw him dig his free hand into his belt. The grip I'd known since dark: short, jagged, drawn damned quietly from its sheath. The

knife from the night. My fingers went cold long before the rest of me understood.

I didn't move toward him. I moved the air. "Hagan," I said, as kindly as a wolf approaches a calf, "you have my knife in your hand." He blinked. "Your knife?" - "The one someone was more stupid than me with recently, one night." A few turned their heads, slowly, like trees in the wind. Hagan grinned wider. "You mean the knife from the story no one heard?" I nodded. "The one the forest heard." I took three half steps, so small they looked like inaction, and held out my hand. "Show me."

He showed me. Not in the hand. In the ribs. Or he wanted to. I saw the direction from which men strike who believe the first thrust decides everything. I gave him the shoulder, hard, at the exact moment his arm was measuring, and his knife swept past and struck leather. Someone screamed behind me, not me. I twisted into him, felt his teeth click against my forehead, grabbed his wrist, twisted. The knife fell. Hrodgar—the one who supposedly never gets where he's needed in time—was suddenly a wall behind Hagan's knee. Hagan's leg buckled. His face searched for the ground, found it.

"Leave it," I said, and two men lifted him up as if traitors weighed only half as much. I picked up the knife. The same notches. The same coldness. The same grip that tells the hand, "I am not made for honor, I am made for shadows." I lifted it up. "This," I said, "is not the first man this knife has made stupid. The last one lay in the woods, between my shoes, and had the wrong opinion about my neck. This one wanted to get the right opinion." A murmur, a ripple running through the grass. Hagan laughed, a small laugh. "I just—" - "Yes," I said, "they all do. Just."

We didn't have a long trial. Long trials are for Romans and for men with time to spare. We had neither Romans nor time. "Blood price," said the Bructerian, into whose circle the messenger had fallen. I nodded. "It stays." I looked at Hagan. "And your price?" I asked him. "What is the price of a knife in the dark?" He spat at my feet. At least he had taste. "The forest," I said, "takes such. It takes them silently. But today I want silence to listen." I had him push down on his knees. He made the mistake of looking for my sword. Mistake because he didn't see the hand I placed on his forehead. I pushed. Not hard. Just so he looked at me. "Listen," I said, "we're a bunch of bastards and brothers, but no one stabs his own man in the neck at night. That's the one phrase even drunks remember." I drew the blade across, briefly, cleanly, not deeply—I want him to still hear—then lengthwise, deep enough for his body to understand that his

stories ended here. He fell, making little noise. Good traitors die quietly. Then at least they're useful for once.

A few exhaled as if they had only borrowed the air. Sigar was still standing by the bier, ashen-faced. I nodded to him. "Carry him on." He lifted, his muscles trembling, but he ran. I walked beside him, speaking softly so only he and the night could hear. "It was my fault," I said. "I should have skimmed the smoke. Hid the bell better. Forbid the cloaks. Take your share, but no more." He nodded, twice, too quickly. "I have—" "You have," I said. "And you will carry until you understand what you have carried."

We laid the messenger down at the edge of the ravine, where those who run gather their gaze before rushing on. Two women came, silently, carrying a sheet of coarse cloth. They didn't speak, they did. One placed her hands clasped across his chest. The other stuffed a piece of bread into his fist. "For the road," she murmured. It's women who do these things right.

Back in the camp, the smoke was heavier and the horns emptier. But the quarrel wasn't dead. Quarrels never die, they only sleep. We paid the cows, we gave the knives, we put the man on guard. The Bructeri said, "Enough." The Chatti said, "We'll count anyway." Ours said nothing; they drank what was left and pretended the day was over. I stood still, in the middle of the circle, raised a horn that had more air in it than mead. "Listen," I said. "Mead makes you brave, smoke blinds you, bells make you stupid. We've had all three today, and one is dead who shouldn't have. I don't want another. So: bells on the posts, capes on the horses, passwords three times slowly. And whoever rings the storm bell for fun will sleep outside tomorrow."

A few laughed until they realized I wasn't laughing. Then they nodded, those short, curt nods men give when they don't want to apologize but know they should. Hrodgar set a barrel on the edge. "Only for those who've already been beaten," he called, and five lined up. I didn't line up. I hadn't taken my hit yet. It would come later, from the gods who love scores.

The night drew in. Someone started singing a song, off-key, dirty. It was about women and wolves, and at the very end, about a piece of bread that's never where hunger wants it. Sigar sat a little way off, his arms around his knees, his head heavy. I sat down next to him and said nothing. Silence is the best bond when words are too big. After a while, he looked up. "He smelled like us," he whispered. "Like smoke. Like horse." - "And yet you saw Rome," I said. "That's how we die. Not from Roman steel. From the smoke in our own heads."

The storm bell now hung on a pole, high, under a hide. No one touched it. A Brukterer, who had earlier been the loudest in demanding a toll, came over and raised his horn. "Your knife," he said. "Could you have dropped it?" - "Would you have wanted to?" - "No." We clinked glasses. The clang sounded honest. He left. That's how peace goes when it's on stilts.

I looked into the embers, and in the embers I saw faces that were no longer there, and faces I would lose if another bell rang at the wrong time. I thought of the man from the night, whose blade now lay in the grass, and how many more knives there would be who had learned too late where they belonged. "We will die of misunderstanding," I murmured, "long after the Romans have learned what fog is." The forest answered with a branch that collapsed in the fire, softly, as if in agreement.

Later, I walked along the edge where the watchmen stand, whose eyes know the water and can distinguish the sounds. The password came three times, carefully: "Boar." - "Boar." - "Boar." No "honor." Good. The moon hung low, as if it had gotten drunk and was ashamed of it. I put my hand to the post where the bell hung, felt the cool metal through my fur. "Tomorrow," I said, "we'll ring it properly." And in my head, I could already hear it. Not for loot. For war.

I didn't lie down until the smell of morning began to arrive. The smoke was thinner, the stars paler, and somewhere someone who had stayed up too late was laughing. I took a sip that tasted of tin and let my eyes close. The knife from the night lay with me now. I stuck it into the ground, all the way, until the handle was just a shadow. "Here," I said to it. "You stay here. You won't stab anyone else tonight." The earth took the knife like a secret. And I slept as if I had one less.

The next day we'd talk again. About cows, about rations, about roads. About the price of smoke. And we'd drink again. And we'd hear wrong, see wrong, and pull wrong again. But maybe, just maybe, one of us would say "boar" in time, and the other would hear "boar." Sometimes that's enough to stay alive.

Until then: mead, murder, and misunderstandings. Our daily bread. And I, the one who counts whether there will still be enough knives pointing in the right direction tomorrow.

Chapter 27: The Winter of the Long Knives

Winter came not like a storm, not like a scream, but like a knife slowly sliding into the skin, cold, relentless, without haste. The first frost cracked over the puddles like breaking glass, and suddenly everything was harder, heavier, quieter. We had outwitted the Romans, we had defeated them, but against winter, any sword was as useful as a wooden stick in a fire.

The trees stood black, as if they hadn't lost their leaves, but sold them. The sky was a gray stone that never broke. We crouched in our huts, which were too close, too small, too dirty, and we pressed ourselves against the fire, which was never big enough. The smoke hung low, stinging our eyes, and outside, dogs barked until they eventually fell silent—either because hunger had eaten them or because one of us had.

The first dead weren't warriors. They were children. I remember a woman holding her child at her breast, and it was no longer sucking. She rocked it, humming it, as if it were still there, and no one dared to tell her that she was only holding a body. Then the old people died. Quietly, in their sleep. We laid them in the snow, and the snow absorbed them as if they had never been there.

But winter doesn't just devour the weak. It devours trust. One of our men disappeared during the night. We found him in the morning behind the huts, his blood already black in the cold, his throat open. No struggle, no scream – just a knife, clean, cold. They said he had stolen meat. A small bone was missing from the storeroom. A bone. But a life. And no one knew who had wielded the knife. Maybe everyone. Maybe no one. Maybe winter itself.

Soon everyone was a suspect. One look too long, one horn too full, one piece of meat too large – and you had a knife in your back. It was as if we were playing Romans: discipline, laws, mistrust. Except our laws were written in blood, and our court was the darkness behind the huts.

I tried to maintain order. I shouted, I threatened, I promised. "We defeated Rome," I cried, "and now you want to slaughter each other like drunken dogs?" But the words went up in smoke. They listened to me, nodded, drank—and the next night, another one was dead.

Once we caught them. Two men trying to escape with some supplies. I ambushed them in the snow. Their tracks were so clear, as if the gods themselves had left them. They stood before me, pale, trembling, their hands

empty. "We only wanted—" they stammered. "Only to live." I looked at them, and I understood. But if I let them go, others would follow. So I led them back. The next morning they were hanging upside down from the gate, their necks slit. The snow turned red, then black. No one spoke of it, no one wept. People drank and ate as if nothing had happened.

The climax came when we caught a thief. He had stolen a sack of meat from the storage pit. Meat that should have lasted us another two weeks. We stood him in the middle of the camp. He trembled, screamed, swore it wasn't him. But the evidence was in his hands. I could have killed him immediately. But that wasn't enough anymore. They wanted a sign. They wanted blood to warm them.

We tied him to a stake, his hands behind his back, and everyone who was hungry stepped forward. Everyone cut his skin with a knife, not deeply, but enough to make him scream. Men, women, even children. It took hours for him to die. As he fell, some laughed, others cried, and I stood there and thought: We are worse than the Romans. We don't kill out of power. We kill out of hunger.

The days dragged on like old wounds. The meat was running out, the mead was frozen, and some chewed bark until their gums bled. We burned the last pieces of furniture, the last wagon wheels. The forest fell silent, as if it had grown tired of us.

But those who remained, those who survived, became hard as stone. They spoke little, they drank quickly, they kept their knives close. The winter had broken us, but it had also shaped us. No legion in the world could frighten us anymore—not after this winter of the long knives.

One evening I sat by the fire, which gave off more smoke than warmth, and I saw the men's faces. Gaunt, scarred, their eyes like holes in the night. I thought: These are no longer men. These are weapons. Winter has forged them.

And I knew: When the snow melts, when the forest turns green again, Rome will have an enemy worse than any wolf. An enemy who has survived hunger, cold, and mistrust. An enemy who knows what it's like to sleep next to friends and fear knives.

We haven't defeated winter. It has defeated us. But it has made us into something that even winter can no longer kill.

Chapter 28: Rome wants my head

It wasn't a secret crawling through the grass like a snake. It was a slap in the face, an open laugh from Rome: They want my head. Not my men, not my tribes, not the forest. Me. Arminius. Son of the Cherusci, friend of the night, enemy of the empire.

The messenger came on a gray morning, frost still clinging to his beard stubble. He was no Roman, no—Romans wouldn't have survived. He was one of our own, a trader who had crossed the border. His tongue stumbled with fear, but the words were clear: "They spoke in the Senate. In Rome. They called your name like a curse. They promised silver, land, citizenship—to whoever brings your head. Dead or alive."

For a moment there was silence. Then one of the Bructerians laughed, short and sharp, like a dog that's been chained up too long. "Your head? What do they want with a head that only curses and stinks of mead?" Another murmured, "Silver, land, citizenship..." and the silence that followed was heavier than any threat. Everyone heard the coins clinking, everyone saw the land they would never set foot on, everyone felt the dagger they might find at their own throat that night.

I slowly stood up, my back aching, my throat dry, but my laughter was louder than the fire. "My head?" I said. "Rome wants my head. Rome! The same Rome that came into the forest with thirteen legions and came out with only a few crows. They want the head that broke their necks. Then let them come and take it."

A few laughed. A few didn't. I saw the eyes that lingered on me too long, as if they were already counting the price. I saw hands that trembled—not from cold, but from greed.

Later, at the mead, I heard it. A whisper, a name, a price. One spoke too loudly, too drunk, too stupidly. "Silver for his head. More than we've ever seen. More than one man can ever carry." I was behind him before he realized I was there. I put my hand on his shoulder, felt him stiffen. "Silver, huh?" I whispered. "Will you count it before you die?" He stammered, shook his head, but I pulled him up, pushed him into the center of the fire. "This one has already spoken of my head as if it were in his sack. Tell me: Shall I take his before Rome does?"

The crowd fell silent. Then someone yelled, "Take him!" – and I saw the fear in the face of the man who had just seen silver. I let go of him and stepped back. "Not today," I said. "But listen carefully, you and everyone else: My head belongs to me. Anyone who wants it will pay with their own first." I pushed him back into the darkness, and he fell, breathing heavily.

That night I didn't sleep. I lay on the blanket, my eyes open, and heard the footsteps outside. Every step could be a dagger. Every cup could be poison. I laughed quietly because it was ridiculous: I had killed Romans, shattered legions, and now I feared my own camp. But that was war. You don't always die by the enemy's sword. Sometimes you die from the greed of your friends.

In the morning, I took a knife, cut a branch, and carved into it: "Rome wants my head." I hung it on the gate for everyone to read. Below, I carved: "Then let them take it."

The men saw it; some laughed, some spat, some remained silent. I knew they were thinking about silver. I knew they were thinking about land. But I also knew: as long as I laugh, as long as I threaten, as long as I draw the knife faster than them—my head will stay where it is.

And Rome? Rome won't get my head. Rome will get bones. Roman bones, in the mud, in the snow, in the dust. As long as I breathe, their heads will roll, not mine.

Chapter 29: Peace? Screw Peace

He came in the rain. They always come in the rain. Romans, messengers, traders, priests—they all love the rain because it makes their voices more important than they are. The man had oil in his hair, as if he were afraid the sky would wash it away otherwise. His coat was red, but the red wasn't from blood, but from cloth dyers in Rome who had never held a sword. His boots gleamed. He entered our camp as if we were a filthy farmyard and he a dealer with expensive cattle.

I could feel the men already holding their knives. A Roman in the camp was like a wolf in a pen. But I raised my hand. "Let him speak," I said. "You should let the idiots finish speaking before you slaughter them."

The man looked at me as if I were the cause of his nightmare—which I was. He bowed stiffly and spoke in a voice like cold water: "Arminius, son of Segimer. The senators in Rome, and the lords of the empire, offer you and your tribes peace. Prosperity. Trade. Land. Citizenship."

“Peace,” he said, as if it were a golden word that could be uttered without it rotting.

The men laughed. Loudly. One choked on his mead, coughed, spat, and the laughter grew. A Bructerian took a bone from the fire and threw it at the Roman's feet. "There. Your bargain. My last bone. Stick it up your ass." Another vomited, having drunk too much mead, right at the messenger's boots. "My prosperity," he yelled, "there it lies!"

I stood up, slowly, letting the mead from my horn spill onto the ground. "Peace," I said. "You come with your scarlet cloths and your empty words. Peace. I tell you what peace is, Romans: Peace is when we lay down our weapons and you train us with your whips like dogs. Peace is when our children learn your names and forget their own. Peace is when we dance in your markets while you ration our bread. Peace is just another word for slavery."

The messenger blinked, swallowed, and raised his hand like an actor. "You can trust Rome."

Then the laughter erupted again. "Trust Rome?" one yelled. "Like Varus trusted?" Another shouted, "Ask the crows how much they trust Rome!"

I stepped closer, so close that the messenger could smell my breath—smoke, blood, and mead. "Tell your Senate," I whispered, "if they want my peace, they should pull it out of their asses. Tell them: We already have our peace. It's: Romans dead, forests free. We don't need anything more."

The messenger wanted to say something else, but I turned around and waved. Two men grabbed him, pulled him to the edge of the camp, and kicked him in the back. He fell into the mud, picked himself up, and ran—back south, back where he came from.

The fire crackled, the horns blared. We drank. But not everyone laughed. Some stared silently into the fire. Some thought of peace, of safety, of women who no longer cried, of children who no longer died. And one of them spoke out.

"What if peace is better than this?" he slurred, too drunk to smell the danger. "What if our women are right? No hunger, no blood... just a roof and a piece of land..."

It was silent. Then I stepped forward. I grabbed him by the collar, pulled him up. "Say that again," I growled. He trembled. "Peace..." "Peace," I shouted, "is when you lose your head without it rolling on the battlefield! Peace is when you live like a dog, fed, gagged, neutered!" I pushed him into the fire, not into it, just close enough that he screamed as the heat kissed his face. Then I pulled him back. "This is peace. This is what it feels like."

The men nodded. Some laughed. The man remained silent, his beard half singed.

But the real blow came later. At night, at the edge of the camp, I heard voices. Two men, quiet, whispering. I approached, and I heard the word "Rome." I heard "agreement." I heard my name.

I stepped out of the shadows, drawing my knife. "What deal?" They froze. One was silent. The other spoke too quickly. "We just—we just thought—" I plunged the knife into the tree next to his head. "You thought you could buy peace by selling me. Is this your deal?"

They were silent. I nodded. "Good. Then we'll make another agreement." I called the men and pulled them both into the middle of the camp. "Here," I said, "are the first people who wanted peace with Rome. You know what that means."

The crowd went wild. No long speech, no judgment. They were tied with ropes and hung from the trees where the snow could find them. I looked into their eyes until they were nothing but glass. "This is peace," I said. "This is how it always ends."

The men shouted, drank, and beat each other with joy. The fire burned higher, as if challenging the heavens.

I stood there, my horn in hand, my heart filled with hate and laughter. "Rome offers us peace," I cried. "Fuck peace! We want war. We want blood. We want Rome to tremble every time the wind blows from the north."

And they roared with me.

I laughed, and there was more truth in my laughter than in all the peace treaties ever written.

Peace? Screw peace. As long as I live, there's only war.

Chapter 30: Friends Who Aren't

Friend is a word like warm smoke: smells good, makes you lazy, and later stings your eyes. Winter had taught us that knives last longer than promises. The bounty from Rome had taught us that greed is louder than loyalty. "Friends" in times like these are only men whose knives you haven't yet seen. I took Hrodgar, Bear, Lucra, and the boy Sigar with me, not because of their strength, but because I knew their weaknesses. Strength is fickle. Weaknesses are reliable.

The neighbors' camp lay in the dank hollow between two ridges—a place I would never choose for my home. Too deep, too open, too hungry for fog. It smelled of wood smoke, grease, horse—and oil. Not our oil, not the good, rancid grease used to grease hides. Thin, sweet, Roman oil that dances on your fingers and makes knife handles friendly. The men at the gate smiled too broadly. Smiling is only useful when teeth are used.

"Arminius!" The host—Irminfried, a man who made his name bigger than his chest—opened his arms as if we were summer. "Friends among friends!" He hugged me, his hands lingering on my shoulder a heartbeat too long. Hrodgar whispered behind me, "If he squeezes any harder, my mead from yesterday will spill out again." I smiled. A smile is a mask that protects well against masks.

We walked through the alley of huts. There were too many new blankets, too many freshly sewn hems, too much neat lacing. War makes people crooked. Order is a luxury for the wrong people. By the fire, a signet ring gleamed on a hand that pretended to be black with soot. The ring was too clean. On it was an eagle, barely worn. I remembered it. Not the man—the ring.

"Sit down," sang Irminfried, and his wives laid out bread and salt. It's an old saying: if you eat a man's salt and bread, and he eats yours, then there's a bond there for a while. I insisted he take first. He smiled, hesitated a blink too long, then took it. I chewed slowly, my eyes on his hands. Friendship isn't a word; it's what hands do while mouths talk.

"You look good, Arminius," he said. "Rome makes you famous." - "Rome wakes me up," I said. "Famous is for men who are already dead." Laughter. Not mine. I took a sip - not because I was thirsty, but because every gaze that follows my horn interests me more than what's inside the horn.

Hrodgar put his arm around one of her warriors, squeezed, and tested muscles. Bear stood like a post beside the fire, pretending to be asleep; Bear never sleeps when mistakes are in the air. Lucra lay in the shade and talked to the smoke. Sigar stared into the salt as if he saw in it the answer to a question he couldn't ask. I sensed the dogs weren't barking. "No dogs?" I asked casually. "We have them hunting at night," said Irminfried. "Hunting for what?" "For rest."

After dinner, they wanted to hunt, of course. Men who don't have dogs always want to take you into the forest. "For wild boar," said Irminfried. "The tracks are fresh." - "Wild boar," I said, "we already have it." I patted Hrodgar on the stomach. Laughter. Not genuine. He insisted. "Just a piece. Only men. Old custom." Old customs are always brought out when new sins need to be covered up.

I nodded. "Only men," I said, "and only four of us." I pointed to Hrodgar, Bär, and Lucra. "Sigar stays by the fire. Someone has to count who comes back." Irminfried's eyes, a shade too dark. "As you wish," he said sweetly. "Like a friend."

The forest took us as it always takes us: hesitantly, but definitively. The snow still lay in patches, hard as bark, dirty as an old lying shirt. We took the path they "knew." After two hundred steps, I turned, by mistake, of course. "Wrong," said Irminfried's husband, the one with the signet ring. "Right." - "Left," I said. "My wild boars are wearing the wrong shoes." He was no longer laughing. I had happened to walk right into the wind that blew his voice into my ear as he whispered to his companion, "Second Path." I could see the words, even if I didn't quite hear them. "Second Path" is the path where friends die so that scouts may find friends.

I stopped, bent down, pretended to see a footprint. "Sign?" I asked quietly, casually. "Boar," said Hrodgar. "Boar," said Bear. "Boar," said Lucra. Irminfried's man repeated it too smoothly. His companion stammered. "Honor," he said, then corrected himself: "Boar." Hrodgar looked at me. In his gaze, the axe was already half out.

We came to a hollow. "Here," said the ringman. "They like to camp here." "Who?" I asked. "The pigs," he said. "They're silent," I said. "Like you." I took another step. Then came the arrow. Not at me. At the air between us, friendly, as if it wanted to introduce itself. It buzzed past my ear and fell into the snow like a frightened bird. I did three things: I fell, I rolled, I laughed. Laughter in such moments is like screaming, only more useful. Hrodgar jumped, Bear stood—when Bear stands, the arrow always hits the wrong man, and the wrong man is never Bear. Lucra disappeared.

Two or three shadows detached themselves from the slope—too disciplined for farmers, too unruly for legionaries. Roman scouts in German furs. They shot poorly because they were too close. I didn't shoot at all. I ran, but I didn't get away. I ran into the corner you only see when you've learned to read maps by faces. The wrestler wanted to be clever and stepped aside. I joined in. Our dance was short, and in the end he was dancing with the earth. "Honor," I said in his ear, and pushed his head deeper into the snow while he was still gasping for air. Hrodgar grabbed one, breaking his leg with the force with which other trees snap. Bear grabbed the third by his armor, and his face made the sound wood makes when it doesn't survive the winter.

It was quiet. Not because the forest was quiet. Because we let it be. Lucra appeared from behind a tree, his tongue briefly against his tooth, like a wolf who knows the flesh is still twitching. "More?" he asked. "Not today," I said. I knelt, wiping the wrestler's cheek, on which there was no blood at all. Only oil. Thin, sweet, Roman oil. "You wear Rome on your face," I said. "Yes," I said for him.

We took two alive. Not out of kindness. Out of a hunger for information. It's better when fear still has enough air to speak. "How often?" I asked. They were silent until Hrodgar showed them that hands can speak. "Three times," said one. "At night, in the fog, in the wind." - "Who?" - "Irminfried... sometimes his brother-in-law... sometimes the man in the gray cloak..." - "And what do you get?" - "Oil, knife, salt, wine... and if things go well: silver." Always the same list. Always the same surrender as a shopping list.

We brought them back, not to the camp. First to our heads. Then to the edge of the clearing, where Irminfried had just stepped out of the darkness, his hands raised, his voice soft. "Friends?" he called, "Everything alright?" - "Friends," I said, and the word tasted as if it had been sleeping inside a dead fish for the past few days.

We stepped into his fire. His men saw the prisoners. One wanted to run. Bear saw him, so he stopped running. I sat the two of them in the middle, had them kneel, and placed the wrestling man next to them. "The hunt was good," I said. "We found wild boars that spoke Roman." Laughter that didn't know if it wanted to be laughed at. Irminfried raised both hands. "Arminius, listen to me..." - "I'm listening," I said, and in my voice was the knife from chapter fourteen. "I've been hearing very well, ever since someone made me hear my throat at night."

He spoke. Men like him speak when they have a choice between air and blood: sentences that are naked and ashamed. "We just wanted peace... they pushed us... winter... children... salt..." All true. All false. I raised my hand and cut off the last "..." before it choked him. "I understand," I said. "That's why you all won't die today." I nodded at the wrestler. "But he will."

I didn't make it long. Long is for drama. I cut his hand open under the ring and pulled the ring off. His hand let go, and the ring fell into the embers. It hissed, and that was a better judgment than any words. Then I walked around him and placed the point between two vertebrae, where little lies die. He made the sound most people make: the sound that belongs to no one.

I let the second one run. Not free. Run. "To the wall south," I said, "and tell him that Arminius has assessed the forest and that his prices have risen." He didn't understand. Hrodgar gave him the kick that replaces reason. He ran. When men run, they sow trails. And when trails grow, we reap.

Irminfried's brother-in-law started talking before anyone asked him. "We'll give hostages," he blurted out. "Two boys, one woman..." - "No," I said. "You'll give four boys. Two from you, Irminfried. Two from your brother-in-law. And you'll give me your ring—the one that's now ash—carved in wood. You'll wear it visibly, so everyone can see what you are no longer." His mouth opened. "Children..." he began. "Children are interest on peace," I said. "Better interest than debt to Rome." There was a murmur. No one liked it. I didn't like it either. I just liked that it worked.

Sigar stood next to the stake, pretending to count sparks in the fire. He trembled a little, his teeth clenched. He would learn. Either today or later. "You," I said to him, "write the names of the hostages in the dirt. And when the rain washes them away tomorrow, write them on the arm." He nodded. Boys who still believe the world is waiting become men when they realize it isn't.

At night, I tested every horn, every bell, every hide under which sounded music slept. I had the salt cellar sealed and hung the key around the neck of the man who hated wearing it the most. Hate is a good watchman. I set sentries who disliked each other. Men who like each other sleep at the same time. Men who hate each other don't let the other blink.

Irminfried arrived, late, small, without hands. "My sons," he said, "are young." - "That's why they're alive," I said. "If they were old, they'd already be dead." He swallowed. "I was..." - "Hungry," I helped him, "exhausted, pressed, seduced, betrayed, frightened - take one from the basket. I don't care. You're alive because I can make men for my men out of your boys. And because I don't want a battle today that turns inward." He nodded, not in agreement, but in surrender.

I slept by the door. Sword under hand, knife at my ribs, feet in boots. He who takes off his boots believes in peace. I wasn't dreaming. I listened to the wood working, the wind stirring the smoke, the way a man wept quietly somewhere. Perhaps Irminfried. Perhaps one of his sons. Perhaps the forest. All three sounded the same.

In the morning, I stepped to the stake where the ring had turned to ash. I took a piece of charcoal and drew a circle in the snow. Not large. Just large enough for three men to stand in if they wanted to be friends. "This is my circle," I said aloud. "Hrodgar, Bär, Lucra, Sigar—in." They stepped inside. I saw Irminfried and his brother-in-law and the men who had smiled yesterday. "You stand outside," I said. "Until it hurts. If pain doesn't drive you out of Rome, it will drive you into the forest. It's a good place to die."

I made rules that tasted like iron: No alliances without hostages. No salt without bread. No hunting without dogs. No horn without a call. No bell without fire. No friend without an enemy named by name. Rules are fences. Fences don't stop wolves. But they make it clear who wants to play sheep.

We walked. Not quietly. Not fleeing. The way men walk who still have teeth. Behind us remained a camp that had learned that friends are precious. Ahead of us lay the forest, which knew we would become more precious. Hrodgar grunted. "Good morning, Arminius. We have fewer friends." "Then we have fewer reasons to wake up at night," I said. Bear said nothing, so it was true. Lucra was already half gone, searching for traces of the one we had let go. Sigar carried a piece of wood—not a trophy. A hostage learning to appreciate the weight of names.

I thought of all the hands that had patted my shoulder over the past few months. Some had supported me. Most had counted how far they still had to go before reaching my neck. "Friends who aren't friends," I murmured. "From now on: friends who know they're better off staying friends." The forest listened. It didn't laugh. It has a sense of humor, but it rarely uses it.

Later, by the water, where the ice still didn't know whether it wanted to be fish or stone, I washed my hands. The oil didn't quite come off. Roman oil climbs into the cracks and stays there until blood comes. I rubbed until my skin turned pink. "Rome wants my head," they had said. Rome will get my hands first, if they get me—but not clean. I wiped my fingers on the bark and dropped the shavings into the water. The water took them, as it takes everything that is light.

By the time we set off again, the day had already slumped. I walked in front, the others behind me. The circle had shrunk. That was good. Small circles are harder to break. "When they come again," said Hrodgar, "they'll come with more." - "And we," I said, "will come with less. Fewer friends. Fewer mistakes. More knives."

The path curved into the shadows. I curved with them. I smiled, for no reason, and this was the reason: I knew who was walking behind me. I knew how their footsteps sounded when they were tired, how their fingers twitched when they lied, and how they didn't twitch when they told the truth. I knew what our loyalty was made of. Not pretty. But tough. Tough enough to split heads. Tough enough to get through the next winter. Tough enough to rewrite "friend": not as smoke, but as a blade pointing in the same direction.

So ended the day I had fewer friends. And so began the day I slept better. Not because the world was more peaceful. Because I had made it narrower. And narrowness suits us. It keeps us warm. It keeps us awake. It keeps knives where they belong: in hands I can count.

Chapter 31: Betrayal by Fire

The fire was our heart. It was the only thing that couldn't betray. Or so we thought. But even fire lies. It crackles as if it were telling stories, yet it only consumes wood and flesh. That night, the fire was large, too large. Sparks rose as if they wanted to reach the sky. Men sat around it, horns in their hands, mead in their beards, and the air smelled of smoke, grease, and that faint

undertone that's always there when betrayal is near—like iron left in the rain too long.

We sat, and the stories flew. Hrodgar recounted for the twentieth time how he had bitten a Roman's sword out of his hand. Lucra mocked him, saying he had rather chewed his tail off, and there was great laughter. Women walked among us, adding more meat, laughing at the wrong places because they knew when to laugh to avoid being hit. Sigar, the boy, listened with his mouth open, as if he had never heard stories before. The fire turned his eyes into mirrors.

I drank. I never fully laugh when I drink. Drinking is a tool, not a goal. And while the others roared, I heard the pauses. Pauses reveal more than words. One remained silent too often. Hagan. A Cheruscan, neither old nor young, one of those who easily disappear into the shadows. His hands were too close to his belt, as if afraid something might slip.

"And then," roared Hrodgar, "the Roman lay there, his mouth open, and I saw the gold fillings in his teeth!" Laughter. Horn against horn. And then Hagan: "Gold in teeth can be found among the centurions on the Rhine, not in the swamp near Detmold."

The laughter died a heartbeat too soon. No one knew why. But I did. How did Hagan know what the Romans wore on the Rhine? He had never been to the Rhine. He had never been where men had seen the golden gleam. I slowly laid down the horn. The fire crackled, and the sound was louder than the laughter.

Later, as the laughter laboriously boiled back up, Hagan handed me the cup. "Your horn is empty, Arminius." His smile was too broad, his teeth too white. I took the cup. I smelled it. Mead, yes. But there was something—bitter, foreign, no honey, no smoke, no fat. I didn't drink. I tipped it slowly, as if I were drinking, and let most of it run into the fire. It hissed, unlike mead. The fire itself lifted the mask of betrayal.

I jumped as the hiss sounded. My fist struck Hagan's jaw, his cup flew, and the men stared as if thunder had struck us. "Friendship!" Hagan roared, "I just—" But my knee was already on his chest. I drew the knife, holding it up for all to see.

"Poison," I said. "Poison on the fire." The crowd fell silent. Only the fire continued to speak, crackling, hissing, laughing. "This man wanted to make peace with Rome, right in our circle." I pressed the knife to his throat. "Say it, Hagan. Tell me who you wanted to serve."

He was silent. Silent like someone who believes silence is noble. I hate noble silence. I ripped open his shirt. Underneath – a chain. Not Germanic craftsmanship. Roman fingers had fashioned it, too neatly, too smoothly. "There!" I roared. "Gold for loyalty. Loyalty for poison."

The men raged. They screamed, shouted, some wanted to tear him apart. But I held him. "Not you," I said. "I do. Treason against fire is judged with fire." I pulled him up, dragged him to the edge of the embers. He fought, kicked, and finally screamed. "Arminius! I swear!" "You swear falsely," I growled. I grabbed his head and pushed him into the fire. Only briefly, but long enough that his face burned, his screams filled the sky. I pulled him back so everyone could see his twisted mouth.

"This is what betrayal tastes like," I said. Then I plunged the knife deep into his chest, twisted it, and pulled it out. Blood flowed, spurted, and fell into the fire. It hissed again, just like before, only louder.

I dropped the body, directly into the embers. Flames licked his hair, his flesh crackled against the wood. Men stared. Some laughed nervously. Some looked away. But everyone understood.

"There are no lies around fire," I said, "because fire consumes everything that is false. Do you hear? Anyone who speaks to Rome, anyone who mixes poison, anyone who takes gold, dies here where we sit. By the fire. In front of everyone."

No one objected. No one drank. Not for a while. The fire burned, and in its sparks I saw faces—Romans, traitors, friends who aren't. I finally drank anyway, slowly, and the men followed. But the laughter never returned.

The fire crackled, and in every crack I heard a word: betrayal. Betrayal. Betrayal.

Chapter 32: My Last Feast

We gathered the entire village. Not just our village. Everyone who still had blood in them and could raise a horn. We slaughtered pigs, cattle, and sheep, as if we were bribing the gods to grant us another day. We built a fire so large that even the sky was afraid. Sparks rose as if they wanted to be stars. Wood crackled as if it were laughing at our misery.

The first horns were still circling, and the first ones were already lying in the dirt. Not dead—just too full, too heavy, too happy. A man laughed while vomiting, another sang with his mouth full, bits of flesh flying into the smoke. Women danced, hair like ropes, eyes like torches. Some laughed, some screamed, some did it right in the shade of the tents, knowing there would be no shade tomorrow.

I sat in the middle of it, horn in hand, meat in my mouth. I laughed, I mocked, I poked Hrodgar in the side so that he almost fell over. "Look at this," I said, "we're celebrating as if we'd already burned Rome." - "Or as if Rome would eat us tomorrow," he laughed back. We clinked glasses, mead flowed, drops trickled down our beards.

Lucra wrestled with two women, one on his lap, one in his hair, and he laughed like a wolf. Bear sat and ate, ate, ate—he was the only one with more meat in his belly than in his hand. Sigar tried to keep up, but the boy couldn't drink like we could. He swayed, he slurred, he sang songs he didn't even know. I laughed, but somewhere inside me, a nagging feeling came: "This is the last time."

A fight broke out—of course. One stole meat from another's plate. One touched the wrong woman. One sang too loudly. Fists flew. Horns broke. One lost a tooth, another a rib. Blood dripped into the fire, and the fire licked it greedily. They fought, got up, laughed, and kept drinking. That's who we are. We don't die—we fight until we're too tired to harbor hatred anymore.

I stood up and raised my horn. "Listen, you bastards!" I shouted. "We drink because we die tomorrow. We laugh because otherwise we'd cry. We fuck because the gods have no patience! This isn't a feast for the Romans, nor a feast for the gods—it's our feast. My feast. My last feast."

They roared, they howled, they called my name. They drank as if they could drown death. Women climbed onto the tables, tore their clothes off, danced, sweated, moaned. Men fell on top of them, laughed, screamed, and pushed. Mead flowed like rivers, flesh flew through the air, bones slammed against skulls.

At one point, a tent caught fire. Someone had held the torch too low. No one extinguished it. They danced around the flames as if they were new gods. I laughed. I almost cried. Because I knew: Nothing of it would remain. Only smoke, only ash, only memories.

I kept drinking until the world blurred. And then I saw them: crows, dozens, hundreds, above the fire. Their wings cast shadows that looked like spears. I saw Varus's face in the smoke, his mouth open, his gaze dead. I saw myself, laughing, covered in blood, a sword in my hand. And I heard my own laughter, not now, but later—somewhere long dead.

The festivities raged on. Men crawled over each other, women screamed, children laughed, dogs bit chunks of flesh from hands. There was no order left, only ecstasy. Mead, blood, sweat, smoke. All a single stench, a single scream.

And yet, at some point, it quieted down. One after another, they fell. First into the straw, then into the mud, then into silence. Horns tipped over, bones crackled in the fire. I still sat there, horn empty, heart full. I knew: This was my last celebration. I didn't drink anymore. I didn't laugh anymore. I stood up, stepped into the darkness, and left the fire behind me.

The flames still burned, high, proud, wild. But they didn't burn for us. They burned for what was to come. And I knew: the celebration was over, and so was life as I knew it.

Chapter 33: Reckoning in Blood

The morning smelled of metal. Not of fresh steel, but of the dull iron that remains when words rot and only knives speak. Mist crept in streaks over the water, which acted harmless on the shore. I stood at the edge of the ford, shoes in the mud, and felt the cold rising up my toes like a memory that refuses to fade. Behind me, men breathed in rhythm, like bellows that have been working too long. In front of me, the ledger waited.

"Romans?" asked Hrodgar without raising his voice. "Romans," said Lucra, slipping back from the fog like a chilled trout. "Two dozen in front, more to the rear. And at Irminfried's camp, a light burns at the wrong hour." "Wrong hour?" grumbled Bear. "The hour when you knock on doors that aren't your own," said Lucra, letting a drop fall from his cloak as if it were proof.

I placed my hand on Sigar's shoulder. The boy was no longer a boy, but his heart still beat as if it wanted to wake the forest. "Tell me the password," I murmured. "Boar," he said. "Once again," I said. "Boar," he repeated, more slowly. His breath steamed in small vows. "Good. Today he who says 'honor'

dies." He nodded, and in his eyes was that stubbornness that kills more than any spear if not reined in in time.

We placed the logs where the slope gave the water an elbow. Not grand, not heroic. Wood just waiting to fall politely. Above us, stones waited, round and damp, as innocent as stones appear before they write on faces. I nodded, and Hrodgar released the first bolt. The log sighed, toppled, and the forest held its breath.

The Romans stepped into the ford, shields on their shoulders, cloaks wet, their formation precise, as always when they believe order is stronger than earth. Water up to their waists, the river made their legs heavy, and the shield on their chests turned to stone. Their helmets cut holes in the fog. The first to arrive cursed, the last to arrive didn't hear. Good.

"Not yet," I said. Men hate that word. They always want "now." But "not yet" is the only magic formula I know. It keeps you alive. Two, three more steps. Then I raised my hand, and the slope buckled.

Wood spoke first. Stone answered. The logs slid like drunken priests, swayed, laughed, and then they slammed into the shields as if into smooth foreheads. The crash ripped through the fog, and the meaning of price and toll became clear. Romans toppled, Romans sank, Romans learned that water has hands.

"Side!" I shouted, and our men slid along the edge, sheltered by the undergrowth. Lucra disappeared, Hrodgar roared softly—a feat only he could perform. Bear was Bear: a flexible tree with purpose. We didn't stab like heroes. We stabbed like scribes on parchment. Briefly, succinctly, at the edge, where you erase when you've made a mistake.

Then the air ripped at another seam. From Irminfried's camp, on the second ridge, a small flame leaped up, too bright, too hasty. A torch that meant to be a signal, even though it was born too soon. I didn't have to look. I knew that color. Betrayal has its own shade of red.

"He's drawing the price himself," I said. "He's taking off his trousers to sell them to Rome," Hrodgar growled, raising his axe. "Not on the hill," I said. "Not yet." I yanked Sigar back by his cloak, which was already halfway forward. "We'll turn the screw here first."

We pushed. Spears came out flatter, knives shorter, the Romans sought the center and found only the edge. An optio screamed something that, even

without Latin, sounded like fear. I jumped into the corridor that opened between two shields, and there was a face that didn't recognize me. Good. I opened an account in his forehead. The blade decided where the interest lay.

A horn sounded—wrong. Not ours, not theirs. A third, too greedy, too proud. I smelled the oil. I smelled the freshly sewn leather. I smelled the ring we had turned to ash yesterday, now carved in wood, on a false hand. The slope opposite filled with shadows that were not Romans and not friends. Irminfried's men, writhing as if they were worms that thought they were snakes.

"Now," I said to Bear. It was only one word, but he heard the whole speech in it. He took a step into the ford, weighed his blade as one weighs a question, and answered three before they were asked. Hrodgar laughed, but without teeth, and made a window out of a shield. Lucra cut off a man behind the ear the song he never meant to finish. Sigar stabbed too early, but not too deeply—he learned even as he blundered.

Irminfried's torches flickered, as if the men carrying them had forgotten that fire also kisses. They wanted to wait for us to be crushed in the Roman chaos, then reap the remains. I took their harvest away by giving them what they wanted, only too soon and too much.

"Torch down!" I shouted. No one obeyed. So I obeyed myself. I ripped the small storm bell from my belt, which hasn't been rung for fun since Chapter 26, and struck it so hard against the post that the sound split the fog. Our people now knew the meaning:**Clamps closed!**From both flanks rolled small wedges of teeth and wood, which we had practiced quietly over the past few nights. Men who hate each other but fight side by side; men who love each other but fight differently. That's the trick: You don't order, you align.

The river decided to be with us or against them. Romans thrashed, slipped, raised shields that became their graves. Irminfried's men hesitated halfway up—too far to watch, too close to run. I gave them a reason to choose. Two arrows that didn't have to kill, just tell. One struck a cloak made to be struck. The other struck a pride made to crumble. The hill faltered, like a thought that realizes it's wrong.

Then I was in a circle. The circle is where four men can see you and no one has time to shout. A Roman pushed; I let his point into the ground, giving him the shove he needed to get to know his gods better. Next to him, one of Irminfried's fell at my foot. I kicked him further into the future: three fingers, a

crack of ribs, and the rest was silence. Sigar was next to me, too close, so I brought him closer; proximity has rules. "Two fingers below the throat," I said. "Not into hope, into certainty." He nodded, shifted, corrected, grew a little older.

The Romans didn't retreat gracefully. They retreated in a Roman fashion: shield by shield, step by step, as if Death were forced to sign. We signed for him. At some point, they realized that signatures melt in water, and then the line didn't break—it dissolved, like bread in broth.

There he stood. Irminfried, like a man who had just decided to be someone else, even though it was already too late. No ring, no smile, only that offended nobility in his eyes that traitors get when they realize they've been called traitors. Two of his men on his left, one on his right. All three with shields that were too heavy for them. Above them, the forest, which didn't laugh. Below them, the river, which laughed a lot.

"Arminius," he began, and I raised my hand. "No," I said. "Today I'm speaking. You hear. Your tally, Irminfried: One – the messenger who died in your circle. Two – the bell you rang. Three – the ring that turned to ash. Four – the torch from just now. Five – the Romans you wanted to lead into my ribs. Do you want to counter that?" He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, like someone who understands for the first time that words are not a weapon, but an alibi. "I only wanted—" "Yes," I said, "you only wanted." I stepped closer. "Only to live. Only more. Only more peacefully. Only with Rome, if Rome is strong; with us, if we are victorious. That's a lot of 'onlys,' Irminfried. I also have one: only you."

His men raised their shields. Bear raised his shoulder. Shield strikes shoulder, shoulder strikes man. The left one walked. The right one wobbled, pretending to still be able, then unable to. Hrodgar stepped on the middle one's foot until the foot forgot how to stand. Lucra took away its neck with a move that looked as if he were only caressing it. The third ran. Sigar tripped him, clumsily but honestly, and the man fell so long that he grew old on the way.

"I'm giving you a choice," I said to Irminfried. "One I've already decided. You speak in front of everyone. And then you die in front of everyone. That way, the sentences become final."

We drove him to the bank, where the men deferred, wanting to know what men were like. He raised his hands, showing palms too clean for so much filth. "I traded for my people," he said, loudly, across the river, across ours, across

his. "The winter—" "Was for all winters," I said. "The Romans—" "Are for all Romans," I said. "Your hunger—" "Is not a judgment, it's an excuse." I stepped even closer, until we were breathing the same breath. "Say it correctly, Irminfried: You sold yourself. And you won't name the price."

He was silent. A crow laughed. Hrodgar spat in the mud. Sigar stood a little crooked, as if surprised that the world wasn't a stage, but a ditch. Lucra tested the wind, as if it might still come down to arrows. Bear counted what was still standing.

I turned my knife in my hand so he could see how little drama it takes to be final. "Just tell me one thing: How much did they promise you?" He looked at me, and in his eyes was the truth that men hate:**enough**"Enough," he whispered. "Enough," I repeated, nodding as if he'd settled a score. "That's enough then."

I made it clear, not beautifully. No neck, no back of the head—no quiet end. I thrust from the side, where men wear the lie they call heart when they feign courage. Not deep, then again, deeper, and then I held him so he would look at me. "See me," I said. "Not Rome. Me. I am the one who collects your debts." He sank, and I didn't let him fall until his eyes had registered that it was truly over.

We left the body at the ford, in water that pretended to wash everything away. It didn't. Blood makes any broth more honest, but it doesn't clean it. His men stood there, still in a heap they wanted to call a formation. I raised my hand, and the heap crumbled into what it was: men who now had no leadership, and so lived. I let them go. Not out of clemency. Out of bookkeeping. Living fear writes more bills than the dead pay.

The Romans weren't finished yet. Two squads tried to get over the third stone, which they thought was solid. They were wrong. Bear stood where error pays. Hrodgar took a breath as if he needed it to strike. Lucra turned a scream into a sigh. Sigar made another mistake—he jumped into a gap that wasn't yet one—and found himself eye to eye with a man who had survived too many times. The Roman grinned, and the boy didn't understand why. I understood. I was there before the Roman realized he wasn't grinning anymore. My knife wrote a new line into the boy's arm:**Don't jump. Pull.**

"Thank you," whispered Sigar, pale and angry with himself. "Pay me later," I said, showing him the spot where air becomes air. "And stop thanking me. The forest doesn't accept compliments."

The water carried away the last shields as if they were leaves that didn't want the year to end. The crows came, unhurried, because they know no one will take away what is theirs anymore. We held the edge until the breathing sounded like breathing again and not like an animal eating itself. Hrodgar laughed, this time with teeth, and slapped me on the shoulder, knocking half the morning out of me. "A good payday," he said. "A payday is never good," I said. "It's just due."

We went to the river, which pretended to be new. I knelt and put my hands in the water. Cold ran up to my elbows, into my shoulders, into the back of my neck, into my head. I rubbed, and the red faded, but it remained nonetheless, as shadows under fingernails, as fine lines in the grooves. Water washes, yes. But it doesn't forget whom it washes. Bear acted as if he were only drinking. Hrodgar dipped his head and claimed afterward that it made him more beautiful. Lucra sat on the root, examining the traces left by the day. Sigar stood the way men stand when they realize they are no longer boys.

"Write," I said to him, and he looked around. "In your head," I said. "Write: Irminfried is accounted for. Romans: minus two dozen. My own: minus three. Mistakes: minus one. Fear: minus nothing. That stays the same." He nodded slowly, and I saw the words searching for space within him. Some find space, some make it.

We pulled Irminfried's body from the water. Not out of respect. Out of necessity. You don't leave debts in the river. Two of his men came hesitantly, and I let them carry them. "Bury him on the side that doesn't belong to you," I said. "And if you want to know who it belongs to: it belongs to me until Rome claims it again." No one objected. No one asked if that was fair. Justice is a currency that buys nothing in the forest.

We retreated to the strip between trees and water, where you can hear both but not hear anyone. The men ate quietly, the way you eat when cold is in your stomach and won't go away. I didn't drink. Not out of virtue. Out of mistrust of the peace that comes in horn form. Sigar's knife lay on the edge, not quite clean. He looked at it as if it had betrayed him. "Clean it," I said. "But don't polish it. Steel that shines wants to be seen. Ours wants to work."

When the sun acted as if it wanted to take care of itself, I went to the ford once more. I looked at the water running away, as if it had to fetch gods who had arrived too late. I looked at the mud that knew our soles. I looked at my hands, which no longer knew how to clean. And I said quietly, so only the forest could hear: "The account isn't settled. It's only continued."

Hrodgar stepped next to me. "You're calculating too much," he said. "I only calculate when I have to pay," I said. "And us?" "We'll keep paying," I said. "Until someone closes the till or the forest buys us out."

He laughed, and his laughter sounded like wood that doesn't break. Bear nodded, as if it were a prayer. Lucra softly whistled the note that only ravens like. Sigar wrote in his head and forgot nothing. We walked away from the river, back into the trees, where the air tastes of bark and what remains when you ignore people. Behind us remained water, mud, wood—and blood, etched in grooves like numbers. In front of us remained the war, which never ceases to send bills.

That was the reckoning in blood. No end. An interim result. A line under today, nothing more. And tomorrow? Tomorrow we'll continue writing. With blades that don't shine, with hands that don't become clean, and with a laugh that says to the crows:**Not yet.**

Chapter 34: When the smoke clears

Morning came as if he were drunk. He staggered over the hills, rubbed his eyes, coughed smoke into the valleys, and pretended he didn't know what had happened during the night. But the ground knew. It stank of iron, of entrails, of fear that had leaked into his trousers. The smoke hung low, heavy, greasy—like a carpet no one wanted to clean anymore.

I stood on a hill and looked down. The field that had been full of Romans yesterday was now a field of bones, shields, spears, bodies lying bent over as if they'd been hit in the neck mid-laugh. Crows hopped, pecked, and fought. Dogs tugged at arms as if they were rabbits. I thought, "So this is what victory looks like. A smelly dog chewing on a hand."

Hrodgar came up the slope. He had a new cut on his face, across his cheek, fresh, red, and dirty. "You look like a hero," I said. He laughed, spitting out blood and bits of teeth. "Heroes vomit more easily than I do," he grumbled, sitting down next to me. Lucra appeared, lugging two Roman helmets stuffed with meat he'd gathered. "For later," he said, and his voice sounded as if it had already lived ten lives. Bear came last, slowly, staggering, as if he had the whole world on his shoulders. He didn't sit down, he stood, like a tree that doesn't topple over even in a storm.

There were fewer of us. Too many were missing. Names no longer called. Voices no longer laughing. I heard them nonetheless, like an echo that refuses to die. Sigar sat further down, both young and old, knife in hand, but he wasn't carving—he was staring. I knew what he saw: faces he himself had made disappear. The first time, you kill only the enemy. The second time, you kill yourself, too.

"Rome?" asked Bear. "Come back," I said. "Again and again. They have cities, roads, slaves, gods made of stone. We have forests, blood, and anger. But anger lasts longer than stone."
Lucra laughed dryly. "And mead lasts longer than anger." He drank, coughed, drank again.

We walked through the field, picking up anything we could use. Swords, shields, knives. Romans have good iron, and when they don't need it anymore, we're happy to take it. A boy found a helmet, put it on—it was too big—and fell forward. Everyone laughed, even me. You still laugh, even when everything's broken. Maybe especially then.

The women came, some looking for men, others found only parts. They screamed, cried, cursed, and tore what was left from the crows' beaks. Children stared, silent, with those big eyes that see more than they should. One reached for a sword, couldn't lift it, but dragged it behind him anyway. I thought, "Here comes the next battle."

We built fires in the camp, small ones this time. No one wanted another big one. Mead flowed again, meat sizzled, blood was washed away as best they could. Men drank, women drank, even the old people drank, as if they wanted to forget they were still alive. I drank too. Not because I had to, but because water tastes like an insult on days like these.

One said he had killed a Roman who was praying. Another said he had gouged out a centurion's eye with his bare hand. They laughed, they boasted, they spat. But I heard the cracks in their voices. Each of us knew that he was no longer the same as yesterday. Each of us knew that he was less.

I looked into the flames. Yesterday they had been pillars of fire, burning heaven and hell. Today, only small tongues licking at wood. But the smoke was still there. Smoke settles more slowly than anything else. It hangs, creeps, lingers until you taste it in your throat and feel it in your eyes. Smoke reminds you of what has burned—and that you can't bring it back.

"Say something," Hrodgar demanded. "A speech, Arminius. A great one. We have won, damn it!" I stood, horn in hand, and looked at them—all those still there, with scars, with wounds, with empty eyes. "You want a speech?" I asked. "Here it is: We have won, yes. But victory stinks of shit and blood. It gives us no future, only one more day. Rome will come again. Always. And us? We drink, we fuck, we kill, we vomit—and we get up again. That is not heroism. That is survival. That is all we have. And that is enough."

They were silent. Some nodded. Some stared. Some drank. The fire crackled as if it were laughing. I laughed too. A dry, bitter laugh. Not out of joy, but because I knew: This was the truth, and no one wanted to hear it.

Later, I withdrew. I left the camp and sat down at the edge of the forest. Smoke still hung over the hills, heavy, greasy, slow, as if it would never disappear. I breathed it in. I tasted it. I let it stay with me. Because I knew: When it subsides, when it truly disappears—then everything will be over.

But he was still there. He still lay over trees, huts, people. He still said: "You're alive. Still."

I drew my sword, blunt, dirty, and bloody. I looked into it as if it were a mirror. I didn't recognize myself. I saw only smoke. And I grinned. Because there is no god, no Roman, no friend who can take away my grin as long as I breathe.

That was my epilogue. No end. Just smoke settling. And me waiting to see what emerges beneath.

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