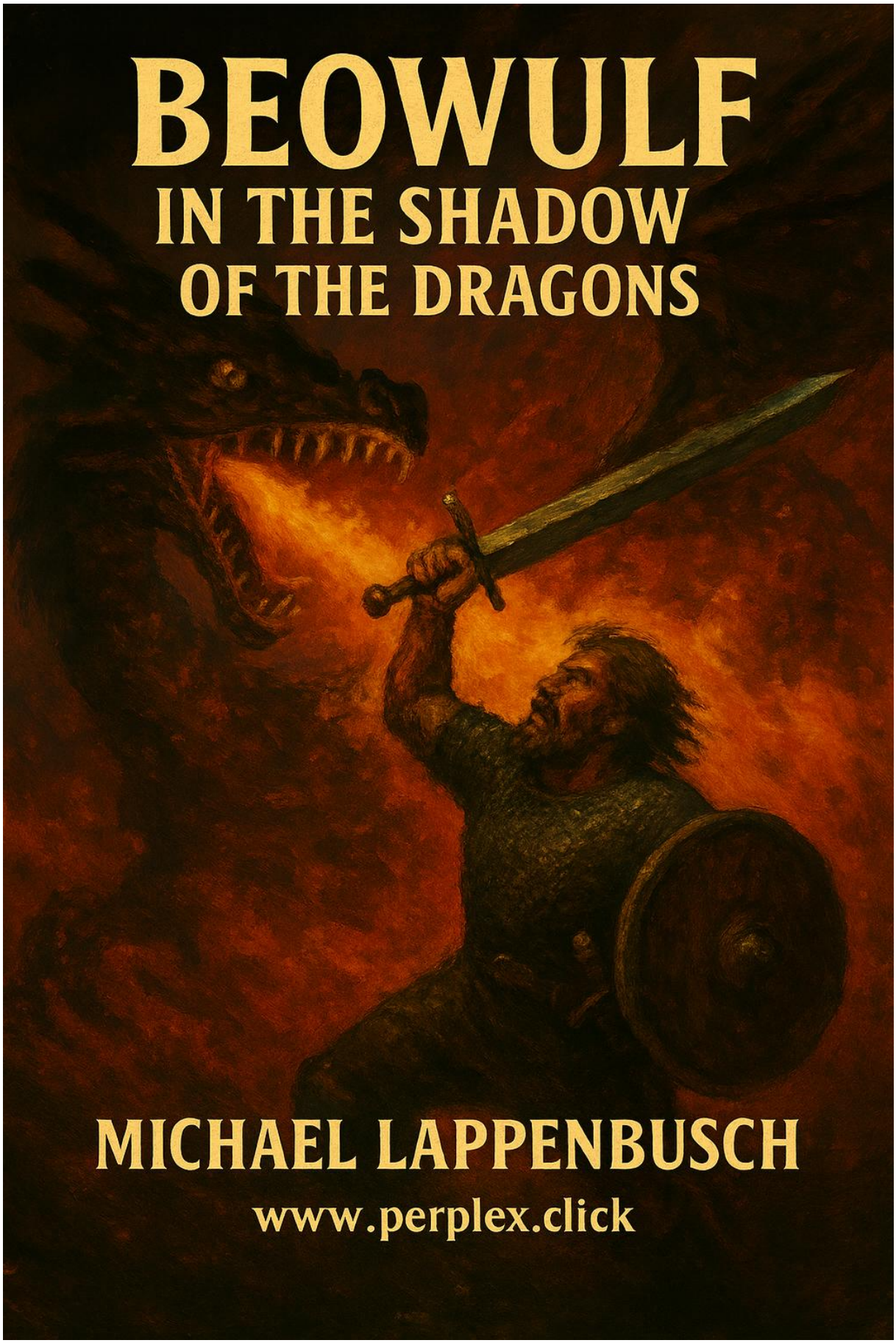
BEOWULF

IN THE SHADOW OF THE DRAGONS



MICHAEL LAPPENBUSCH

www.perplex.click

Contents

CHAPTER 1 – Smoke over Herot 3
CHAPTER 2 – When the Night Smells of Blood 9
CHAPTER 3 – A Stranger, a Boat, a Hip Flask 17
CHAPTER 4 – Beowulf enters the stage and does not stumble 25
CHAPTER 5 – Mead, Slaps, and Nasty Prophecies 34
CHAPTER 6 – Grendel arrives without knocking 44
CHAPTER 7 – Bone Music in the Ballroom 56
CHAPTER 8 – An arm as a trophy, a hero in a frenzy 66
CHAPTER 9 – Herot cleanses away the blood 75
CHAPTER 10 – The Mother from the Swamp 87
CHAPTER 11 – Descent into the Stinking Lake 101
CHAPTER 12 – A Sword That Surrenders Too Late 113
CHAPTER 13 – Beowulf between fame and residual alcohol 127
CHAPTER 14 – Homecoming of a battered bastard 139
CHAPTER 15 – The Kingdom That Tastes of Iron and Fear 150
CHAPTER 16 – Crown, Bottle Caps and Cold Nights 163
CHAPTER 17 – How to Grow Old Among Young Corpses 175
CHAPTER 18 – The quiet years full of noise in the head 187
CHAPTER 19 – Whispers from the Fire Mountain 198
CHAPTER 20 – The Dragon Turns in His Sleep 210
CHAPTER 21 – Gold, Greed and Other Diseases 223
CHAPTER 22 – A Thief, a Cup, a Wildfire 233
CHAPTER 23 – When the Fields Turned to Ash 247
CHAPTER 24 – The old king laces up his armor 260
CHAPTER 25 – Young Cowards, Old Anger 273
CHAPTER 26 – Beowulf and the Last One Who Remains 288
CHAPTER 27 – In the Shadow of the Dragon Flame 302
CHAPTER 28 – You can't just cough up blood 317
CHAPTER 29 – Between Painkillers and Prayers 329
CHAPTER 30 – The hero miscalculates with eternity 340
CHAPTER 31 – How to Burn a King 353
CHAPTER 32 – Ashes in the Wind, Gold in the Dust 365
CHAPTER 33 – Songs for One Who Can't Hear It 378
CHAPTER 34 – When the heroes leave and the shadows remain 389
imprint 402

CHAPTER 1 – Smoke over Herot

The smoke hung so low that even the gods would have bumped their heads had they visited Heorot that evening. It clung to the beams, to beards, to eyes. It was everywhere, a gray beast that slowly crept into your lungs and curled up there like a fat cat. The men coughed, drank, and laughed anyway, because they knew nothing else. Outside, the wind whistled off the sea, but inside, in the belly of the hall, it was as hot as hell, only here there was mead instead of damnation. Or so they said. I wasn't so sure.

The benches were packed with warriors who had seen too much and were trying to forget even more. Shields and spears stood in rows against the wall, as if standing watch while their owners slowly but surely drank themselves into a coma. Torches flickered, sputtering and leaving black streaks across the carved wooden panels, on which no noble god was recognizable anymore, only shadows that looked as if they were harboring regret. A stench hung over everything, a mixture of sweat, old blood, mead, and burnt meat. If you stood in it long enough, you felt as if your own heart had turned into something brown and viscous that tasted of coal.

Hrothgar, the king, sat on his high bench, staring into space as if he had once seen some promise there, a promise long since broken. His beard was gray, his eyes watery, yet his hands were still as broad as shovels. On the table before him lay bones, empty goblets, and a knife so often sharpened it barely had a blade left. Beside him sat Wealhtheow, his queen, with a smile as stern as a sword belt. She poured more mead, again and again, goblet after goblet, as if building a dam against the men's despair. As soon as the mead overflowed, they were quiet again, at least for a few moments.

I sat further back, where the air was a little cooler and the smoke not quite so harsh. A squire, a messenger, a nobody, as they called me, if they even knew my name. I polished straps, filled cups, listened to stories that were long since outdated. Every other warrior wanted to tell the story of the day he first killed a man. Everyone acted as if it had been a victory, but if you looked closely, you could see something else in their eyes: a small, dark memory that wouldn't go to sleep at night. So they drank. And laughed. And slapped each other on the back until it hurt.

That evening the hall was more crowded than usual. Someone had whispered some dark verses about the Thing in the Bog, and since then no one dared to pee outside alone. So the men huddled closer together, as if the smoke had forced them together, and the dogs under the benches ate what fell from the plates and growled in their sleep. The harp cast thin notes into the air, an old skald with trembling hands struck the strings, and his voice was rough as an old cobblestone. He sang of victories and battles, of golden rings and men who had never doubted. I looked around and thought: None of you look like the ones in the songs. You are tired, you smell of fear and sour mead, and your hands tremble when you think no one notices.

Outside, somewhere beyond the wooden walls, the bog lay like an animal holding its breath. Sometimes I thought it could hear what we were saying. When the men exaggerated again, displaying their scars like badges of honor, I imagined the bog was laughing softly. The thing out there, whatever they called it—fiend, Grendel, demon, bastard of darkness—was both an excuse and a threat to them. As long as it was out there, no one needed to worry about the

emptiness inside. You could say, "I'm drinking because the monster is coming," and everyone would nod and pour more. The truth was, they would have drunk even without the monster.

The later the night, the louder the voices. Whenever one swore he'd personally tear the beast's head off, the others laughed, not kindly, but harshly, with an undertone that said: You're just talking. None of them really wanted to go out, down to the stinking water, deeper into the darkness where the thing lived. It was more comfortable to sit inside, in the warmth, in the smoke, at the edge of the circle of light. There you could be loud and feel strong, and the shadows on the walls did you the favor of looking bigger than you were.

Once, one of the younger ones stood up, a lad with red eyes and too much pride. He ripped open his shirt, showed a faint scar on his shoulder, and roared that he'd gotten it from a troll. Everyone knew he'd lied, that he'd torn his skin on a rusty nail when he'd drunkenly run into a door. But they let him talk. It's easier to bear a lie when it briefly makes you feel less alone in your own misery. He danced on the bench, stumbled, fell, and the laughter rolled through the hall like a wave, briefly covering everything: fear, cold, the memory of screams in the night.

I didn't refill his cups until he had fallen silent and was staring blankly ahead. His hands were trembling. He muttered something about dreams, about a mouth full of teeth leaning over him. I said nothing. What could I say? That I'd seen similar things when I woke up at night and the beams above me looked like rib-like shadows? That there were more ghosts in this hall than in the swamp? We didn't talk about it. We drank. That was our prayer, our spell, our attempt to keep the outside world at bay.

Sometimes, when the wind was just right, you could hear a long, deep sound in the distance. It might be the storm catching in the hills, or the sea fighting the cliffs. But on some evenings it sounded different, like a distant, tormented noise, half rage, half hunger. Then, in Heorot, it grew quieter for a few heartbeats. The men held their cups aloft, as if to make sure they had hit the right side of the wall. And then, as soon as the skald began again, they pushed the sound away, deep inside, to where they had buried so much else.

The truth was: Heorot was no fortress of courage. It was a large, creaking wooden belly, filled with men trying to drown their fear. The smoke settled over everything, like a mercy that made nothing clear anymore. The thicker it became, the easier it was to forget oneself. And perhaps that was the true purpose of this hall. Not the songs, not the glory, not the gold. But oblivion.

That evening the smoke was particularly thick. It was like a second blanket over us, only instead of warming us, it slowly softened our heads. I stood between the benches, a jug in my hand, watching the men laugh, shout, and shove each other. And I thought: If that thing from the bog comes tonight, it will find us here, blinded by mead and stories, and it will take us like ripe grain. We would hardly notice we were dying. Perhaps that was the plan. Perhaps that was the only plan anyone had.

The morning after a night in Heorot was like a punch from God, and it always came just when you thought you deserved it. The first rays pushed through the narrow gaps in the wooden planks, thin fingers of cold light cutting through the smoke and revealing the truth: men huddled under the tables, cups stuck in the ashes, vomit on the floor that looked like a failed spell. It smelled as if someone had squeezed the night into a vat and now lifted the lid.

I was usually one of the first back on my feet. A nobody rarely has the luxury of staying in bed. So I trudged through the hall, head heavy, stepping over outstretched legs and half-empty plates, gathering cups that felt as if they were made of lead. The dogs trotted after me, still tired from their nightly feast, sniffing at anything that might be edible. If one of the warriors grumbled in his sleep or reached for an invisible sword, I gave him a wide berth. Some continued their battles in their dreams, with their teeth, their fists, and you didn't want to be their opponent if they hadn't quite arrived in this world yet.

Hrothgar sometimes sat at his bench early, his crown askew, his gaze fixed on the beams. On other days, he didn't appear until the sun was higher in the sky. This morning, he was already there. Before him, a half-empty goblet; in his hand, a piece of bread he wasn't eating. His face was like an old shield: dented, scratched, but still in service. I gave a quick bow and set out fresh mead, knowing he'd drink it sooner or later, no matter how shaky his fingers were. He nodded briefly, without looking at me.

"It was noisy last night," he muttered, more to himself than to me. "Outside, I mean."

I could have said, "In here too, sir." I could have said, "Your men screamed like slaughtered pigs when dreams took hold of them." Instead, I just nodded. Nobody wanted to hear their own screams in the morning.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked.

I thought of the long, dull sound that had hung in the wind like a dark flag. Perhaps I had been the only one still sober enough to notice it. Perhaps I had imagined it, because I had lived in those shadows for too long. "Yes," I said. "There was something there."

The king looked directly at me for the first time, as if to test whether I was fooling him. But there was nothing on my face but weariness. "It will come closer," he murmured, and the bread in his hand crumbled without him noticing. "Such things don't stay in the swamp. They find the warmth, the light, the noise..."

His gaze wandered across the hall, over the snoring warriors, the overturned benches, the half-burned-out fire. I followed his gaze and saw the same thing: an invitation.

Later, as the men gradually crawled out of their nests, the great denial began. Everyone pretended their head wasn't heavy, their stomach wasn't empty, their hands weren't trembling. They patted each other on the back and talked about the coming day as if a great hunt, a feast, a wedding were imminent. Anything was preferable to speaking of what lurked out there in the mist. This thing had no fixed name, and perhaps that was precisely its trick. Without a name, something is harder to categorize, harder to kill, harder to speak of. And the people of Heorot were afraid of words, almost as much as they were of teeth.

The skald, who sang in the evening, looked like a folded-up bird in the morning. He sat near the fire, rubbing his fingertips as if they were old coins. I brought him water and some thin gruel. "You should sing about the truth," I said, without really knowing why.

He laughed briefly, a joyless laugh, dry as old bones. "The truth pays poorly," he replied. "The king wants to hear songs about men who know no fear. Not about nights when he himself lies awake listening to the moor."

“But he knows that we are all afraid,” I replied.

The skald shrugged. “Sure. But he pays me to tell him that fear is plaguing another village.” He looked at me, his eyes red-rimmed but clear. “If I sing that everything is alright in here, he’ll pay for my roof for another year. If I sing that the Thing from the bog will get us one by one, they’ll start asking me why I haven’t run away yet. Do you understand?”

I understood. The songs were like the cups: tools to dilute reality. Except that you didn't get a hangover from lies. Or so you thought.

We spent the rest of the morning trying to restore Heorot to a semblance of order. The ashes were swept up, the tables straightened, the torches replaced. A few of the younger boys were sent to fetch wood from the forest. No one went alone. They laughed loudly as they left the hall, a little too loudly. I watched them go and thought how small they looked among the dark logs, like toy figures placed in the wrong landscape.

In the afternoon, a thin rain began, cutting the air outside the hall into gray threads. I stood under the eaves and watched as the smoke rose from the roof hole, mingling with the rain and settling over the courtyard like a dirty veil. There were moments when Heorot looked like an animal slowly smoking itself out because it could no longer bear its own thoughts.

Inside, the men were practicing what they called courage. They polished swords, checked straps, boasted about the blows they'd dealt yesterday in their drunken stupor, as if they were battle wounds. One complained about the pain in his hand from having punched the wall in his dream, convinced he was hitting the monster. Now the wall was unharmed, but his fingers were blue. The others laughed at him, but perhaps at night they would fight similarly, against something they couldn't see.

In the evenings, when the torches were lit again, everything was as before. The smoke returned, heavy as a promise, and the goblets made their rounds. It was a ritual as old as any god, possibly older. I watched Hrothgar drink, even though he had always intended to do otherwise beforehand. His gaze swept over his men, as if counting them, as if afraid of suddenly encountering a gap that hadn't been there the night before.

“We need a hero,” I once heard him say to one of his advisors when they thought no one was listening. “Someone who wasn’t raised here. Someone who doesn’t yet know what it’s like to fear the nights. Fresh blood. A man who still has something to prove to himself.”

The advisor nodded, though he looked just as perplexed as the king. "Perhaps fate will send us one," he said. "Or the gods."

I thought to myself: Maybe they're just sending us more smoke. Maybe they don't care about us, us and our fear, our songs, our gnawed bones. Maybe there's no one up there looking down on us. Just the smoke, and that doesn't make things better, it just hides them.

That night, just before I curled up among the empty barrels, I heard that sound again outside in the wind. Deeper, closer. It sounded like the breathing of a huge animal slowly waking up. The beams creaked as if remembering who they once were: trees in the dark. I held my breath and listened. No one else seemed to hear it. The men snored, muttered, and groaned in their dreams.

The sound came and went, like a wave. And in the middle of it, for just a moment, I thought I recognized something: something like laughter. Not loud, not human. More like the dry, contented sound of a hunter who knows his prey has tied itself to the fire.

I pulled my cloak tighter around me and told myself that the mead was speaking to me, that the smoke was playing tricks on me. But deep down, I knew that something stood out there, looking at the hall as if it were an overdue promissory note.

The days blurred, becoming a gray broth of noise, work, and mead. Heorot lived like an old warrior who no longer knew how to rest: he stayed awake, drank, roared, slumped briefly into sleep, only to jolt awake again the moment a branch outside snapped. Smoke was our constant companion. It crept into dreams, into stories, into every fold of the blankets. When you came home—if you even had one—you smelled of Heorot. You could tell where you spent your nights just by looking at you, like you can tell who a drunkard trusts.

Over time, the stories about the Thing from the bog began to change. They had once described it as a mere beast: large, ugly, shaggy, with claws and teeth. An animal that could be hunted, killed, and skinned if one was brave enough. But as more nights passed, as the wind carried more sounds, the details became stranger. One man swore he had seen two eyes in the mist, golden yellow, full of intelligence. Another claimed it could mimic human speech, whispering children's names at the edges of fields. Yet another said he had discovered tracks in the mud that looked like a giant's hands, only with too many fingers.

It was astonishing how quickly the men switched from "I'll rip its throat out" to "It's no ordinary beast" without losing face. They recounted these new versions around the fire, more quietly than before, and then laughed too loudly to mask their own unease. The skald listened like a shopkeeper inspecting new merchandise. The next evening, verses suddenly emerged in which the monster was more than a hungry morsel of meat: a punishment, a mirror, a dark debt someone else hadn't paid.

In quiet moments, I wondered who this "someone else" was. The gods? The ancestors? Ourselves? It seemed no one really cared. All that mattered was that the blame lay somewhere else. As long as that was the case, one could drink as if it were a foreign village on fire.

Sometimes I sat at the edge of the great fire and stared into the embers. When the flames grew low, the logs began to glow, slowly, tenaciously, like thoughts that refuse to die. Sparks rose and disappeared into the blanket of smoke, and I thought: This is what we look like, we here. Small, fleeting lights, imagining they can impress the darkness.

Once, Wealhtheow sat down beside me. She rarely did that; queens have better things to do than sit in the semi-darkness with errand boys. She held a pitcher, but she drank little. Her eyes were clearer than those of most of the men in the hall.

“You listen when others are talking,” she said. It didn’t sound like a reproach.

“Someone has to listen,” I replied.

She nodded. "What do you think that creature is out there?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it's just hunger with teeth. Maybe it's something that's fed up with our lies. Maybe it's both."

She looked at me as if she'd momentarily forgotten who I was. "Hungry with teeth," she repeated softly. "I like that."

“I don’t like it,” I said. “But it sounds right.”

Wealththeow was silent for a moment, then pulled her coat tighter. "The king is growing weaker," she murmured. "He drinks too much, sleeps too little. The men see it, but they pretend everything is as it was before. Meanwhile, everything is becoming brittle, like old wood. A single blow, a spark at the wrong time..."

She left the sentence open, but the images were in the room: a burning hall, screaming men, smoke that this time did not only come from torches.

“Perhaps,” I said, “this thing is waiting for just that. For the one moment when no one is pretending to be awake anymore.”

The queen looked into the fire. "Or it's waiting for someone who isn't numb. For someone who comes from afar, where the smoke smells different."

I thought of the king's words I'd overheard: "We need a hero." Perhaps they were all praying, without admitting it, for some foreign bastard foolish enough to actually believe what the songs promised: fame, gold, immortality. Someone who didn't yet know that fame is just another word for the stories others tell about you long after you're dead.

The days dragged on, and the waiting settled like dust on everything. The men trained harder, but without focus. Swords clashed, shields were dented, shins turned blue. Yet in their movements there was always a tiny jerk, as if they unconsciously paused and listened for the sound of footsteps in the mud somewhere outside. At night the laughter grew shriller, the dreams more restless. One man cried out in his sleep that he couldn't breathe, that something was sitting on his chest, heavy and cold. When we woke him, he laughed it off and said he'd dreamt of a fat whore. No one contradicted him.

I noticed that the smoke had taken on a different smell lately. Not just wood, fat, and mead, but something metallic, sharp. Perhaps I was imagining it, but when I inhaled deeply, I tasted something reminiscent of blood. Not freshly spilled, but old, dried, as if the hall itself had once bled and never truly stopped.

One evening, when the wind was particularly fierce against the walls, one of the old planks suddenly broke, and cold air rushed in like a hand reaching for our throats. The torches flickered, the smoke parted, and for a moment Heorot was clearly visible: the tired faces, the half-empty cups, the crooked benches, the shadows in the men's eyes. It was as if someone had drawn back a curtain.

The king ordered the hole closed immediately. Men ran, hammering, stuffing moss into the cracks as if afraid the darkness itself might creep through. When the crevice was sealed again, the smoke returned, and with it a strange sense of relief. As if a mirror that had been too honest had been shattered.

That night, for the first time, I consciously dreamt of the Thing from the swamp. I saw no form, only a shadow that moved like water yet had solid contours. It came toward the hall, slowly, patiently, as if it had all the time in the world. I tried to scream, but only smoke came

out of my mouth. When I awoke, my throat burned, and the torches on the walls cast long, distorted shadows that looked like fingers. I sat up, coughed, and tasted ash.

Eventually, I knew, something would happen. A line would be crossed, a door wouldn't close in time, a name would be spoken aloud that should never have been uttered. Until then, Heorot would live on, like a drunkard who swears every night to quit tomorrow. It was a house slowly setting itself on fire with every torch, every cup, every song that spoke of courage, while everyone knew they dreaded the night.

The smoke over Heorot was more than just burnt wood. It was our alibi, our veil, our excuse. As long as it was thick enough, we could pretend we didn't see the thing out there. But it saw us. I didn't doubt that for a moment. And somewhere far away, perhaps on another shore, perhaps on a ship pushing through gray waves, perhaps someone was already on their way, someone who didn't yet know what it meant to go into that smoke and come out again—if you ever come out again.

I knew only one thing: if he, or whoever, arrived here, we would offer him mead, stories, songs, and the smoke that softens everything. And maybe, just maybe, that would be the beginning of something greater than our fear. Or just the start of an even greater fire.

CHAPTER 2 – When the Night Smells of Blood

The night it all began seemed like any other at first. That's the cruel thing about nights that tear your life apart: they give you no warning. No red moon, no whispering god, just the same old wind, the same smoke over the hall, the same mead in the same grimy cups. When you look back later, you search for a sign, some off-key note, a shadow that was different. But there was only Heorot, as always—loud, crowded, drunk, and weary of its own courage.

The smoke hung heavy under the roof, as if trying to trap us. It was thick with all the years it had spent up here, saturated with stories, lies, and shouts. If it could speak, I thought, it would probably say, "You brought this on yourselves." The men sat huddled together on the benches, shoulder to shoulder, like warriors in a wall of flesh. Shields leaned against the walls, gleaming in the torchlight, but you could see they had seen more dust than blood lately.

The skald played his harp, his fingers scraping across the strings as if they might fall off at any moment. He sang an old song about a hero who had slain a sea monster, naked, with only a knife in his hand. The men roared at the appropriate moments, pounding their fists on the table as if they could beat themselves into the character. I looked at their faces: red cheeks, glassy eyes, beards full of mead and scraps of meat. Little boys lost in their fathers' armor.

Hrothgar sat on his high bench, his crown askew, as always when he'd drunk more than was good for him. He clapped along to the beat, but his gaze was far away, somewhere in a year when he still believed things would get better. Beside him stood Wealhtheow, the queen, tankard in hand, her smile tightened like a bandage. She poured, tankard after tankard, her eyes wide with alertness. I wondered if she was the only one who understood that we had all long since ceased to truly live, but were merely waiting for something to pull the plug.

I ran back and forth between the rows, filling cups, collecting bones, dodging fists when someone's laughter got a little too wild. Sometimes one of them would grab my sleeve, pull me toward him, wanting to tell me something: about a battle he might have fought in sometime, about a woman who supposedly still loved him, about a dream in which he fell from the sky and no one reached out to help him. I nodded, listened as best I could, and thought to myself that these men all had the same dream, just with different images.

Outside, the wind howled around the corners of the hall, scraping at the planks, shaking the roof as if trying to get in. Each time a particularly strong gust came, the torch flames trembled, and the smoke grew thinner, more transparent. Then, for a few heartbeats, you could see faces clearly, as if someone had pulled back a veil. And each time, I wished the wind wouldn't die down again, so we would all have to see what we really were. But the wind is a cowardly bastard: it only opens your eyes briefly and then retreats so you can continue lying.

There was something in the air that evening that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Not an omen, more of an absence. It was as if some sound, some familiar detail, was missing. Perhaps it was the dogs, unusually quiet. Normally they fought under the tables, growling, snapping at bones and feet. Now they lay huddled together, as if they'd decided the world outside was more serious than the crumbs in here. One of them, an old gray male, had his muzzle resting on his paws, but his eyes were open, staring toward the door.

“Today the smoke will consume us,” said one of the younger warriors as I refilled his cup. He laughed, but his hands were damp. “Not the monster.”

"The smoke is eating you alive every night," I muttered. "You just don't realize it."

He didn't understand, or didn't want to. No one wants to hear that he's already half-swallowed. They prefer to listen to the skald, who now moved on to the next verse: The hero stood on a rock, knife between his teeth, the sea raged, the monster roared. The skald sang as if it were about him, but I knew that the man had spent more time with his strings than with any sword. But that's how it went around here: Those who would never fight told the fighters how heroes should behave. And the fighters nodded along, because they couldn't sleep without these lies.

Later that night, the song slowed, became heavier. It was no longer about victories, but about losses, about comrades who would not return. The men grew quieter, one after the other. The mead did its work, smoothing their rough edges, softening the world. One began to weep, softly, with his face on the table. No one said anything; they pretended he had fallen asleep.

I felt my skin tighten, as if it were shrinking. Something was wrong. The wind outside had stopped howling. That was it. It was as if someone had cut off the sky's breath. The silence behind the wooden walls wasn't peaceful; it was tense. A gap into which something much larger was about to leap. I went to the door and pretended to check if the bolts were properly locked.

The courtyard was dark. No moon, no stars, only a thick, gray blackness that had settled over everything like wet cloth. The air smelled of earth and water, and beneath it was another scent, very faint but distinct: something iron-rich, sharp, like the taste you get in your mouth when you bite the inside of your cheek. I breathed in deeper and suddenly knew what the rest of that night would smell like.

I pushed the bolt up a little, just to let the cold in, to see if there was any sound from outside. Nothing. No footsteps, no rustling. Just a silence that felt like a stare. I closed the door again, more slowly than necessary, as if afraid of waking someone standing right behind it.

When I turned around, I saw that Wealththeow had been watching me. Her eyes gleamed in the torchlight, and for a moment there was something like understanding between us, so quick that I wasn't sure if I'd imagined it. She raised the pitcher slightly, as if it were her greeting, and I went back into the rows, filling cups, avoiding her shoulders, as if nothing were amiss.

The skald began a new song, one of those the men could belt out. It was about gold, rings, women they claimed to have loved. The mood lifted again, but it was a strained high, like an old man trying to dance one last time. The smoke thickened, and the hall grew hotter. Sweat trickled down my back, and my fingers stuck to the handle of the jug. Everything seemed too much: the voices, the laughter, the stench.

I can't say exactly when the night began to smell of blood. Perhaps it was when one of the men suddenly coughed while laughing, and a small red drop fell onto the table. Perhaps it was when someone cut their hand on a sharp edge and the blood dripped onto the wood, mingling with the spilled mead. It was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that hadn't happened a thousand times before. But this time the smell lingered, stronger than usual, persistent.

I wiped the drops away with a rag. The red trail ran across the wood like a premonition. The rag was old, stained, but that evening it greedily soaked up the red, as if it knew what was to come. I wrung it out over the bucket and watched the water change color. It was only a handful of blood, but in my mind it was already a river.

The night dragged on, and Heorot continued drinking against something no one wanted to name. The smoke clung to their throats, the mead burned in their stomachs, and outside lay the moor, stiller than ever. Somewhere between the last song and the first snore, the world tipped over, so quietly that no one noticed—except perhaps the old gray dog, who raised his snout again and let out a deep, dissatisfied growl.

I should have listened to him.

It didn't happen suddenly, not like in the songs where evil arrives with a thunderclap. It came like all bad things in this life: slowly, insidiously, patiently, as if it had time to collect us one by one. Half the men were already lying across the benches, the others slumped upright like wet sacks, muttering, laughing too late at jokes no one understood anymore. The torches had burned down, thick drops of resin ran down the poles and hissed when they touched the flames.

The skald had long since laid down his harp. He sat near the fire, his back against a pillar, his knees drawn up as if to present less of a surface area should the heavens decide to fall upon him. Hrothgar had slumped in his high seat, his crown askew, his head slumped onto his chest. The queen had vanished, probably into her chamber. Or perhaps she was standing somewhere in a dark passage, listening.

I was tired, but I knew this kind of tiredness: it was more dangerous than sleep. It was the kind of tiredness where you're still aware of everything, but too slow to react. My hands ached from carrying the jugs. I sat down briefly on an empty bench, just for a moment, I told myself. Just to give my back a rest.

Then came the sound. It wasn't loud. No crash, no thunder. More like a deep, drawn-out crack, like when you break an old piece of wood. It came from outside, beyond the heavy door. The few who were still awake raised their heads at once. In the silence that followed, our own breathing sounded far too loud.

A second crack, closer, sharper, followed by a dull thud. The old dog jumped up as if kicked in the back. He bristled his fur, growling so deep it vibrated in the boards. A young warrior laughed nervously. "The wind's playing with the beams again," he said. His voice broke mid-sentence.

The wind, I thought, isn't taking any steps.

Then a shadow slowly slipped under the door. It was just a darker darkness, hard to grasp, but everyone in the hall sensed a shift. The fire flickered as if someone had sucked the air out of the hall. The smell of that metallic something I'd already sensed outside suddenly intensified. Only now it wasn't far away. It was here.

The bolt on the door vibrated as if someone were pushing against it from the outside. Not angrily, not desperately—more curiously. Once. Once more. Then there was silence again. The men who were still awake reached for their swords, but they didn't draw them. They merely held them, as if to make sure they were still there.

"Who's there?" someone shouted, much too loudly. His voice hit the wooden walls and fell back weakly. No answer.

I glanced over at Hrothgar. He was awake now, his eyes wide open, as if he'd realized the depth of the abyss mid-fall. "Stay seated," he said, but his voice was a whisper. "It will pass."

It didn't go away.

The bar bent upwards, slowly, as if by an invisible hand. The wood creaked. Someone cried out, leaped forward, trying to seize the bar. He touched it, and the moment his fingers gripped the cold iron rod, something else was there—a force, great and impatient, like a storm forced into a single, powerful movement. The warrior was thrown sideways as if he were made of straw. He crashed against the nearest pillar, crumpled, and lay still.

The door didn't simply spring open. It was opened. Slowly. With a calmness worse than any violence. A crack, then more, and through that crack, at first, only the night flowed. But this night was not empty. It had weight. It fell into the hall, creeping across the floor like a wave of black water. The torches hissed as if someone had breathed cold air upon them.

Then I saw it. Not a complete picture, just fragments, like when you try to remember a nightmare. A hand—if you could call it that—as big as a shield, fingers longer than my forearm, the skin dark, glistening with moisture, as if it had just come from a swamp. Claws, but not animal claws, more like crooked, overgrown nails, refracting the torchlight. The shadow behind it was enormous, distorted by the flames, and from somewhere in that mass came a smell that overpowered everything else: rot, bog, old flesh, and beneath it the acrid note of blood that had lain in the earth for too long.

Someone jumped up, shouted, and ran toward the door, sword raised. It was one of those who had been the loudest in boasting of their heroic deeds during the day. He didn't get two steps.

The hand shot out, faster than I could imagine. It seized him by the chest, and the sound that followed I will never forget: it sounded like a bundle of dry wood being snapped. The warrior was suddenly smaller, compressed, then with a casual flick of the wrist he was flung sideways. He slammed against the bench, his bones giving way like rotten branches. The blood didn't appear until a moment later, as if it needed the shock to start flowing.

Then all hell broke loose. The men jumped to their feet, some grabbing weapons, others just stumbled backward, searching for something to hide behind—as if there were a place in this hall where one could be invisible. Screams, the scraping of steel on wood, the crash of tables toppling over. Smoke billowed up, mingling with the cold night air, and everything became a flickering chaos of shadows, fire, and panicked faces.

The thing entered. It was large, larger than anything that could walk on two legs should be. Perhaps there were more than two of them, I don't know. My eyes didn't want to see it clearly; they slid over its outline as if protecting themselves. I saw teeth, long and irregular, as if someone had driven stones into a piece of flesh. I saw eyes that weren't red, as you read in stories, but yellowish, like old grease, and yet full of attention, as if they were counting each of us individually.

A second hand shot forward, grabbing two men at once, one by the hip, one by the shoulder. With a jerk, it was like pulling apart wet bread. The blood spurted, warm, bright, surprisingly vivid. It hit my face, and in that moment I understood what I had only suspected before: the night had now found its true scent.

I fell backward, tripped over a dazed warrior who was trying to get up, and landed between overturned benches. The noise was deafening: screams, the cracking of bones, the dull thud of bodies hitting wood and earth. Interspersed was a deep, guttural sound, something between laughter and a growl, coming from the monster's chest. It sounded… content.

Someone beside me was trying to get to their feet. It was the skald. His hands searched for the harp as if it were a shield. Our eyes met for a moment. In his eyes there was no longer any story, only naked terror. "Run," he gasped.

Where to? I thought. There was nowhere to run. The door was blocked by the thing's body, the windows were narrow slits, barely big enough for an arm. And outside there was no salvation, outside there was only the swamp, the same night, only without a roof.

The monster grabbed the next man, half-wrapped him in its own cloak as if he were a bundle of firewood, and yanked him up. For a moment, the man hung in mid-air, his legs flailing, then he vanished into the shadow of the monster's maw. It happened faster than I ever thought possible to see a human being disappear. As if he had never been there. Only the noise remained, the smacking, hideous sound that would wake me in my sleep for years to come.

I crawled, not knowing exactly where, just trying to put some distance between myself and this thing. Under an overturned bench, I found a gap just big enough to squeeze into. I smelled beer, urine, stale smoke. Shards of glass flew overhead, blood dripped from the edge of the table, a warm, sticky rain. Someone shouted my name, but I didn't answer. In moments like these, your own name is a luxury you can't afford.

The hall that had so often made us drunk and cowardly was now a cage. The fire in the hearth tried bravely to burn on, but it was already half-smothered by the smoke and the chaos. The

monster moved quickly, incredibly quickly for its size. It was as if the darkness itself were leaping from one place to another. A shadow here, a jerk there, and again two men were missing, three, four.

For a brief moment, I heard Hrothgar shout. Not like a king, more like a man realizing his entire life had been made of paper. "Hold fast!" he roared. "By the gods, hold fast!"

No one could stand their ground. Those who weren't already dead or unconscious lashed out wildly, but their swords struck more furniture than flesh. One man actually managed to drive the blade into the monster's arm. It was a powerful blow; I heard the sound of metal hitting something hard. The thing flinched, not much, but enough to make us all hold our breath for a moment.

Then it turned its head toward the man, slowly, as if it wanted to get a better look. It was as if someone were holding a candle to the eye of darkness. Those yellowish eyes fixed on him, and in that gaze there was no anger, only a cool, almost curious contempt. The hand shot out, grasping him by the throat. This time it took its time. The fingers closed slowly, and I heard the cracking of his vertebrae, one after the other, like wet twigs in a fire.

I closed my eyes, but it didn't help. You can see some sounds even in the dark.

I don't know how long it lasted. In my memory, everything is simultaneously too fast and endless. Time loses its manners when blood is involved. At some point, at least, the noise subsided. Screams grow quieter when there are fewer mouths still breathing. The crashing, the tearing, the dull thud of bodies hitting the ground—all of it became less frequent, then stopped altogether. Only the fire still crackled, startled and small.

I lay under the bench like a frightened dog. My body was rigid, but inside something was running in circles, pounding against my ribs. The floor was sticky, warm in some places, cold in others. I knew I was lying on blood, on entrails, on things that would have been better left inside a person. I didn't dare look.

Silence is not just silence. There's the silence after a song, when everyone still has the last note in their head. There's the silence of a morning before work begins. And then there's the silence after a massacre. That silence is thick, heavy, and it smells. This one smelled of mead, smoke, urine, and a metallic stench that overpowered everything else. The night had found its color, a dark, broad red that glowed even in the twilight.

I heard footsteps. Slow, deliberate. As if someone were walking through a room full of broken glass, examining each piece. The footsteps weren't light, but not as heavy as one would expect from this figure. They had a mechanical quality, as if the thing had no reason to hurry. Every now and then I heard a smacking sound, a tearing, a soft cracking. It sounded like someone was scraping the last bit off a bone.

Once, it stopped right next to my bench. I felt its presence like a heat, but it was cold. That's hard to explain. It was as if the air around me was becoming denser. I didn't dare breathe. Something dripped from above onto my hand. Warm. Thick. I knew what it was, and yet some childlike part of me wanted to believe it was just water.

The shadow moved on. A few more steps, then again that deep, guttural sound that I can only describe as: content. Finally, there was a sound I hadn't heard before—a long, grinding rumble. As if something heavy were being dragged across the ground.

Later, when we saw the hall in the first light of dawn, we knew what it was: he had taken some bodies with him. Why these and not others, no one could say. Perhaps it was chance, perhaps a sick form of selection. Perhaps he had only taken the ones that tasted best to him.

Then came a dull thud as the door slammed against the frame. Silence. A few heartbeats later, I heard the night again—the wind, returning cautiously, as if checking to see if the coast was clear. It swept through the hole in the roof no one had named, bringing with it a fresh wave of cold.

I waited. Another minute, another. I don't know how long. My body ached, my neck was stiff, my stomach was churning. Eventually, I forced myself to open my eyes. I was lying half on my side, my face just inches from the floor. I saw part of a foot, still inside a boot, but no rest of the man. A finger lay beside it, as if it had come loose and fallen over on its way to the door.

Slowly, very slowly, I crept out. The hall looked as if someone had tried to recreate it, someone who only knew the original from bad dreams. Benches were crooked, some broken in the middle. Bodies were everywhere, twisted at unnatural angles. Some were still whole, others not. It was strange: the dead looked younger than the night before. The alcohol had vanished from their faces, the boasting, the lies. What remained was something naked, almost childlike.

The fire in the hearth was almost out. A few red dots still glowed in the ashes. They looked like tiny eyes. Smoke still hung in the room, but it was thinner, and the smell had changed. Less mead, more iron. The night over Heorot no longer smelled of celebration, but of a slaughterhouse.

I searched for sounds. A whimper, a groan, anything to show that there was still life here. Far in the back, near the King's Square, I heard a gasp. I stumbled over legs, shields, broken spears, until I found Hrothgar. He was alive. He was sitting on the ground, his back against his overturned bench. His cloak was torn, his crown lying askew beside him in blood. He was staring blankly, his eyes wide, his mouth half-open.

"Sir?" My voice sounded strange, thin.

He didn't blink. Maybe he didn't hear me. Maybe he was somewhere in another year, when his hall had smelled only of smoke and mead. I knelt down and shook him by the shoulder. Only then did he react. His hand snapped at me, clinging to my arm so tightly it hurt.

"Look," he whispered. "Look what it has done."

I looked. I couldn't look away. Every glance revealed new details I would never forget: an open chest cavity, empty inside; a face without a lower jaw; an arm still clutching a sword, its fingers so cramped I couldn't unclench them later. The surviving dogs crawled whimpering near the fire, too terrified to touch the flesh.

The first women came in as the sun began to graze the edges of the planks. They had tied cloths over their mouths, but it was no use. The stench seeped through fabric, through skin, through bone. Some endured the sight, others collapsed in tears. Wealhtheow just stood there, pale but upright. Her eyes scanned the dead, and each time she recognized one, something flickered in her gaze, a brief burst of pain that was immediately extinguished by cold.

“Count them,” she said quietly. “All of them.”

We counted. One after the other, as best we could. Sometimes we only found fragments and had to guess. The number was high. So high that the hall, which had been overcrowded the evening before, now seemed too large, too empty among the scattered bodies.

Outside, the rain washed the blood from the courtyard, but inside Heorot it clung. We tried to clean, scrape, scrub. The floor absorbed the red, like a new color. The smoke crept back into the beams, but it couldn't mask the smell. It only carried it into every crack, every crevice. From that day on, Heorot always smelled a little of blood, no matter how much mead we spilled, how much wood we burned.

Later, when the sun was higher in the sky, men from the surrounding farms came. They saw the hall, saw our faces, and their questions caught in their throats. Some wanted to leave immediately, back to their own, smaller houses, as if the distance offered some protection. But the story couldn't be kept out. It crept out, with everyone who left, with everyone who spoke.

That evening we sat in Heorot again. Not all the seats were occupied; some benches remained empty, and it was as if the dead were still sitting on them. No one sang. No one boasted. There was drinking, yes, but the drinking was different now. No longer forgetting, rather a desperate attempt to dilute the images. They could not be diluted.

Hrothgar barely spoke. When he finally raised his voice, it was shaky. "The gods have forsaken us," he said. "Or they are testing us." He looked around, but no one asked the question that burned in everyone's mind: What kind of test is it where someone comes and takes us from the hall like cattle?

The skald sat silently in the corner, the harp on his lap. His fingers mechanically stroked the wood, producing no sound. I wondered how he would capture all this in song—this chaos, this stench, the sound of bones breaking. There are things that don't fit into verse. But I also knew he would try. People need stories, or they fall apart.

In the following days, talk of escape grew louder. Some wanted to take their families and leave, somewhere where the swamp was just a word, not a mouth. Others said the field must not be surrendered to the monster, as if it were an enemy warrior who could be driven off with enough courage. Hrothgar wavered between despair and defiance. Once I heard him say he would have the hall burned, better fire than this night. But he did not. A king does not set fire to his own heart, even if it is rotting.

The story of the night spread like a scent on the wind. Merchants picked it up, messengers embellished it, and neighbors added their own details. The thing in the moor became a demon, a giant, a curse. Some claimed he only preyed on people who gathered in the hall to boast and drink. Others said he came because our king had too much blood on his hands.

Somewhere out there, far beyond the gray water, someone must have heard this story. Perhaps in another hall, where the smoke didn't yet smell of blood, but only of wood and hope. Perhaps a scarred and thirsty man sat there, wondering if it wasn't time to write himself back into a story. Someone who believed that you could simply confront a monster with a sword and a big mouth.

We here in Heorot knew better by now. We knew that the night could smell of blood long before you heard the first scream. We knew that smoke not only comforted but also hid what was coming. And we knew that the thing from the swamp hadn't come through our door for the last time.

We knew it, but we had no choice. So we carried on. We lit the torches, we filled the cups, we sat down at the same tables, still sticky with the smell of death. What else can you do? You can't stand at the edge of the world forever, hoping it will fix itself. You drink, you wait, you look towards the door. And hope that next time someone else will stand between you and the darkness.

CHAPTER 3 – A Stranger, a Boat, a Hip Flask

The morning he decided to leave smelled of fish, cold rain, and bad liquor. No heroic trumpets, no signs in the sky, just the harbor, gray as a hungover memory, seagulls fighting over entrails, and a man too old to believe in glorious twists of fate and too young to have stopped spitting in the world's face. Beowulf stood at the end of the jetty, his cloak open, his boots wet, looking out at the water, which lay before him like a dirty mirror. If fate had a face, this was it: colorless, unmoved, always in motion, and yet, at its core, the same filth as yesterday.

In his right hand he held the hip flask, a dented piece of metal he'd once stolen from an abandoned camp. No one remembered exactly who it had belonged to, but it had been a reliable companion: through nights filled with screams, mornings filled with headaches, days when the world was too heavy to bear sober. The flask was like a small, ugly friend, one who never contradicted him but always had a burning word on his tongue. Beowulf took a swig, barely flinching, even though the brandy tasted as if someone had fermented forgotten gods in a barrel.

Behind him on the quay stood a few of his men, if you could call them that. They weren't the shining heroes of the songs, more like a collection of guys who'd seen too much, received too little, and at some point decided they'd rather die under some halfway competent bastard than alone in a ditch somewhere. Wulfgar, the big bear with the broken teeth, who'd start crying when drunk if someone said "mother." Eadgils with the crooked back, who knew more about knots and sails than anyone else, but never spoke of his past. Skari, the thin one with the quick hands, who could find any purse, but never let anyone touch him. And a few others whose names were forever associated in people's minds with dirt, noise, and strife.

"Really?" asked Wulfgar, scratching his beard and spitting into the water. "We're setting off just because some singer is wailing that a monster in Denmark eats men like bread? It could just be a stupid joke to boost mead sales."

Beowulf looked at him. In his eyes was that tired, hard gleam that men have who know every day is a bad deal—you pay with time and get pain as change. “Have you got a better idea?” he asked. “Stay here and watch us slowly eat each other alive? Same walls, same faces, same stories? I’m sick of battles where the only enemy is the cat.”

Wulfgar shrugged. "I'm not saying I want to stay. I'm just asking if that thing over there really exists. Maybe the skald made it up."

“Skalds don’t invent monsters,” Skari interjected. “The world already has enough. They just write the names on them.”

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "You see, the thin man understands. Something is eating men in a hall over there. A king has sent messengers, and the stories are being passed on over every fire. Perhaps it's an exaggeration, perhaps not. But one thing is certain: if we leave, at least someone will remember us when it's all over. If we stay, we'll end up as old men dying in our own filth. And then they'll only sing songs about others."

The men looked at each other, scrutinizing faces as if they could read a final decision there. But in truth, they had already decided. Anyone who hung out with Beowulf was always just one step away from the next problem. And now that problem stood on the other side of the sea, with teeth, hunger, and a story yet to be written.

"All right," grumbled Wulfgar. "Then let's go and see if the monster likes us."

Eadgils had meanwhile prepared the boat: a long, narrow thing that had seen better days, but still looked as if it would cut through the water rather than be swallowed by it. The wood was dark from the salt and all the storms it had weathered. In places, cracks were visible, patched up haphazardly—like scars on an old warrior. The dragon figure on the bow was peeling, its eyes dull, but it still stared ahead as if it couldn't do otherwise.

Beowulf ran his free hand over the railing. "Well, you old bastard," he muttered. "A few more waves, a few more screams, a little more blood. Then we'll see."

Eadgils watched him sideways. "This thing with Denmark," he said, "is no joke. The stories are worse than usual. It's not just some robber eating a few peasants. It's something eating fully grown, armed men, royal guests. The hall itself is said to scream."

"And?" asked Beowulf. "Haven't we also slept in halls that screamed?"

“Yes,” Eadgils replied. “But we were the ones shouting.”

Beowulf took another swig from the hip flask and passed it around. One after another, they drank. Some grimaced, others didn't. It was a kind of silent vow: We know it's stupid. We'll do it anyway. Because what's the alternative?

A few women, children, and old people stood at the edge of the quay. People who had tied their lives to this gray strip of wood and water and knew perfectly well that every departure was a gamble in which the sea usually won. Some waved, others didn't. Some looked away, as if looking away were some kind of protective charm. A young woman with a soot-smeared face gazed at Beowulf.

"You're coming back, aren't you?" she cried, without hope in her voice.

He glanced at her briefly, as if he had to consider whether he even knew her. Maybe he'd once slept with her sister, maybe he'd only beaten up her brother. The faces in his life were like waves: similar, never the same, always in motion. "I'll come back or I'll die," he said. "Nothing else matters."

She nodded, even though it wasn't a helpful answer. But people need sentences that sound like something, even if they don't mean anything.

They climbed into the boat, one after the other, the wood creaking, the ropes groaning. Eadgils signaled, the men grabbed the oars. The water was cold and thick, but the boat began to move, slowly at first, then more steadily, as if it had realized that standing still was no longer an option. The harbor shrank, the houses diminished to dark specks, and finally everything was just a line between gray and gray.

Beowulf stood at the stern, hip flask in hand, watching the land recede behind them. It wasn't a farewell to home, not in the romantic sense. For him, it was the back of a place that had never truly belonged to him. He knew the taverns, the beds, the corners where one could brawl without the guards immediately appearing. But he had never felt that the ground beneath his feet wanted him.

The wind picked up, biting his face. He took a deep breath. The sea smelled different than the harbor. Less rotten, more brutally honest. It smelled of salt, of cold depths, of things that don't know you but will still come for you if you're unlucky.

“So,” said Wulfgar, who had come to stand beside him, “how do you imagine that working? We arrive, say, ‘Hello, we’ve heard about your monster, we’ve come to kill it,’ and the king puts a few rings around our necks?”

Beowulf shrugged. "Something like that. Maybe there'll be mead beforehand. Maybe not. And if they don't want us, we'll turn back. But then we can say we tried. That's usually all you get from the gods."

Wulfgar laughed hoarsely. "You still believe in gods?"

“If I’m drunk enough,” said Beowulf. “Otherwise, I believe in the one who lives in this hip flask.” He tapped the metal. “He never answers, but at least he keeps me warm.”

The boat veered out into the open sea, and the coastline disappeared completely into the fog. Ahead of them lay only water, wind, and the direction Eadgils was heading. Denmark was a dot in the distance, a story, a hunger. And somewhere there stood a hall filled with smoke and blood, where people stared at the door at night, just as these men were now staring at the gray horizon.

Beowulf felt something stir in his chest, an old, rusty machine starting up again. It wasn't hope. Hope is soft. This was more like rage at the meaninglessness of life. If he had to die, he thought, then at least let it be in a way that someone would still speak his name later, when the cups were being passed around.

He took a long gulp, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned at the wind. "Come on," he muttered. "Show me what you've got."

The sea wasn't a friend, but it was honest. It would slap you in the face if you weren't careful, it would toss you about when it was in a bad mood, and sometimes, when it was really pissed off, it would try to pull you down until your lungs burst. But it didn't lie. No fake smiles, no polite phrases, no "Maybe tomorrow." The waves told you straight up what they thought of you. In those days, it didn't think much of Beowulf and his men.

The wind came at an angle from the side, forcing the water into dirty, short waves that slapped against the bow, throwing cold fists at it. The boat groaned, but it held. It always did; otherwise, they would all have long since become food for fish that were never mentioned in the songs. When the skalds recounted heroic deeds on the sea, they forgot the hours when your fingers froze, you squatted on salty wood while your stomach rebelled and your whole body questioned why you were doing this to yourself.

Skari sat with his knees drawn up on the starboard side, his chin resting on his arms, his eyes half-closed. Anyone else would have thought he was asleep, but his fingers moved in small, nervous gestures, as if counting invisible coins. "I hate the sea," he muttered at one point, as Beowulf passed by. "It has no corners. There's nowhere to lean against."

"You can lean on me," said Wulfgar, who was at the helm. "I'm a rock in the surf, that's what a woman once told me, just before her husband came in and beat the rock out of my face."

A few men laughed, but it was a thin, strained laugh. When the waves rose, their faces showed the likes of children who had long forgotten how to cry.

Beowulf went forward to the bow. The wind was stronger there, but the view was clearer. He looked in the direction from which Denmark would one day emerge, that kingdom where a monster strolled through the door of a hall at night as if it were just another ill-tempered guest. He thought of the stories that had drifted over to them: a hall large enough to swallow a hundred men, gold on the walls, smoke on the ceiling, mead flowing freely. And then this thing that came whenever it pleased and helped itself. Not a banditry, not a cunning ambush. It was as if someone were settling a long-standing debt.

He wondered what could drive a king so desperate that he sent messengers across the sea to tell anyone who would listen of his misery. Kings usually preferred to keep their failures under wraps, along with the bodies they couldn't openly bury. That Hrothgar—that was the name of this Danish ruler—had the story of his cursed house broadcast to the world meant one thing: either he was foolish or desperate enough to risk everything. Perhaps both.

Beowulf produced his hip flask, took a swig, held the liquid in his mouth for a moment before swallowing it. The liquor was lukewarm from his body heat, but it still burned. "What do you think?" he asked without turning around. "Is it just a beast, large and ugly, or something else?"

Eadgils, who was standing beside him checking the ropes, shrugged. "Beasts are honest. They come when they're hungry, they leave when they're full. This thing is supposed to tear men apart and disappear with parts of them. That doesn't sound like animals. That sounds like... a whim."

"Mood?"

“Yes,” said Eadgils. “As if it were fun. As if it weren’t just eating, but a kind of hobby.”

"Nice thought," murmured Beowulf. "Someone out there who dismembers people for amusement. Perhaps we are all just toys that someone shakes enough until it breaks."

“Maybe,” said Eadgils. “Maybe not. I don’t care. I only care about this.” He knocked on the wood of the boat. “As long as this holds, it doesn’t matter if the gods hate us or are just bored.”

The hours dragged on like old men with heavy bones. The light changed slowly, growing paler, then darker. They spoke little. Each was lost in his own thoughts, and they were rarely kind. Beowulf thought of past battles, of nights when he thought this was the end, and then there was another morning when he awoke with a throbbing headache and a new cut on his body. He had seen friends die, brothers, lovers, enemies who had been like him, only on the wrong side of the sword.

Sometimes he wondered why he was still alive. Was he truly better, stronger, tougher? Or had he simply bowed his head more often at the right time? There's a kind of man who thrives on bad luck. He reliably finds it in every battle. And then there's the other kind, for whom luck manages to briefly intervene at the last second. Beowulf didn't know which category he belonged to. Perhaps he was an incident that neither luck nor bad luck could quite categorize.

The night on the boat was cold. The men pulled their coats tighter and huddled closer together. One of them began to hum a song softly, an old one about coming home. Wulfgar yelled at him to shut up, that he didn't want to be reminded of things he'd never had. After that, the only sounds were the crashing of the waves and the creaking of the wood.

Beowulf didn't sleep much. He'd never slept well knowing something was waiting for him. He'd sit by the mast, leaning his back against it, the hip flask in his hand like a small, dully glowing heart. Perhaps he was addicted, not just to the stuff inside, but to the feeling that the world stood on the edge of an abyss and he was the fool looking down to see how deep it was.

Every now and then he glanced up at the sky. Clouds drifted slowly, sluggishly, as if weary of all the wishes entrusted to them over the years. A few stars peeked through gaps in the gray, quickly, shyly, before being covered again. "If you exist," he murmured softly, "and you have something to say up there, then you'd better get ready. I want to see if you can fight better than your monsters."

Nobody heard it, except perhaps the wind. And the wind didn't laugh, didn't answer, simply did what it always did: kept blowing.

The next morning the sky was clearer. The water had calmed, the waves were longer, gentler. Eadgils stood at the helm, staring ahead. "Land," he said finally, without any drama. "Up ahead. Do you see that dark line?"

They saw it. First just a shadow, then a line, then contours: hills, forest, coast. Denmark. The land where the nights seemed louder than the days.

"Looks like any other cursed stretch of coastline," said Wulfgar.

“Yes,” said Skari. “That’s what they all look like before you realize what’s going wrong there.”

Beowulf stood up, stretching his back, which ached from sitting. He felt that old tingling in his hands, that nervous, aggressive burning sensation he got before things got serious. It was a mixture of fear, anticipation, and the hope that this time something would change—within him, in the world, in the stories where his name might one day appear.

He took a sip and passed the hip flask around. The men drank in silence, each with his own little prayer in his head. Some prayed to gods, others to their own memories, still others to no one at all.

"Very well," said Beowulf. "When we land there, we'll be strangers. No one knows who we are, no one owes us anything. We'll be ridiculed, eyed suspiciously, perhaps even thrown out. But we have something they don't."

"What then?" asked Wulfgar.

“We have nothing to lose,” said Beowulf. “That makes us dangerous. And sometimes that’s the only thing that matters.”

The coastline grew before them, becoming larger, closer, more menacing. The wind shifted, pushing them toward a small natural harbor, a bay that looked like a mouth only half-open. That was alright. Beowulf liked mouths that hadn't quite made up their minds. Sometimes you could slip in a word before the teeth snapped shut.

He took a deep breath, tucked the flask back into his belt, and felt the weight of the sword at his side, old, worn, but still sharp enough to free someone from their schemes. "Denmark," he muttered. "Let's see if you're better than your reputation."

They started at a beach that looked like any other beach in the north: wet sand clinging to their boots, a few faded bird tracks, and somewhere further up a strip of grass bent by the wind like people who had worked too long under a brutal boss. The sun hung low, pale, as if ashamed of this part of the world.

The boat creaked as the keel hit the bottom. Wulfgar was the first to jump into the water, which reached up to his knees, cursing the cold, and pulled the boat further ashore. The others followed, pushing and tugging until the boat was half on the beach and wouldn't immediately slide back into the water when the next wave came. They had done this many times before. It was a well-rehearsed routine: securing the boat, checking weapons, loosening shoulders, scanning the surroundings.

Beowulf was one of the last to get out. He took his time, stretching his legs as if they were made of wood and needed to be reminded of their purpose. The sand beneath his boots felt strange, even though it was essentially the same as the sand back home. Strangeness isn't in the ground, he thought, it's in the eyes of people who look at you as if you were a mistake in the picture.

On the rise above the beach stood a small group of men in simple armor, spears in hand, shields at their sides. Coastguards who probably stood around there all day, telling each other stories too small to be set to music, hoping that nothing bigger than a drunken fisherman

would ever wash ashore. Today they were out of luck: today strangers were coming. And strangers always meant work.

One of them, a sturdy fellow with a face already wrinkled too soon, stepped forward. His eyes were narrow, suspicious, but not stupid. "Who are you?" he shouted as the Geaten—as Beowulf's men were called—approached. "And what do you want here?"

Beowulf stepped forward, water still dripping from his cloak. He didn't answer immediately. He let the wind gather his words. Then he said calmly, "We are men from the land of the Geaten. We do not come as enemies. We have heard that your king has problems greater than yourselves. We are adept at dealing with problems."

The guard gave a dry laugh. "That's what many who come here say. Traders, beggars, people who want to get rid of their own troubles. What makes you different from them?"

Beowulf looked at him without blinking. There was a hardness in his eyes, something genuine. "Most of those who claim they can solve problems have never seen one with teeth," he said. "We have." He reached for his belt, pulled out his hip flask, and took a demonstrative swig. "And we're thirsty. A thirsty man doesn't like to lie about what he's risking his life for."

The coast guards exchanged glances. Mistrust, curiosity, a glimmer of hope that none wanted to be the first to show. The leader of this group took a few steps down the hill, his eyes scanning the strangers' weapons, their posture, the way they stood. These men didn't look like court dancers, that much was clear. They seemed as if they had been trained to strike before asking what was going on.

“You’ve heard about our… problem,” the guard finally said. He had difficulty getting the word out. “What exactly have you heard?”

“That in your great hall at night a guest comes whom no one invited,” said Beowulf. “That he devours men like other people devour porridge. That your king is in despair and everyone who can hold a sword is either already dead or drunk.”

The men flinched at his words, as if he had slapped them in the face. Truth didn't often sound so direct in these parts.

"You're talking rudely for a stranger," growled one of the guards.

Beowulf grinned narrowly. "Talking rashly is cheaper than being a coward. You can chase us back into the sea if you like. We'll turn the boat upside down, and you'll have one less day of hope. Or you can lead us to your king. Then you can say later that you were there when something happened."

The guard leader was silent for a moment. Thoughts raced through his mind: duty, fear, a vague memory of the glory days the old men sometimes spoke of when they'd drunk too much. Finally, he sighed, as if he'd just struck a deal he knew would get him into trouble. "Very well," he said. "You come with us. But don't lay down your weapons if you value your life. Our king likes men who stand up straight."

"Then he likes us," said Wulfgar, moving the sword a little back and forth so that the hilt could be seen better.

They left the boat on the beach, with only one man guarding it, who swore he'd rather die than leave it to anyone else. No one really believed him, but boats don't just run away. People do.

The road to Heorot led through damp grass, past fields that looked as if they had heard the screams from the hall and had never quite recovered. The air was clearer than at sea, but somewhere beneath it lay a scent familiar to Beowulf: the sweet, thin residue of old blood that never quite washes away, no matter how much rain falls.

The men spoke little. The coastguards walked ahead, their pace brisk, but not without that slight hesitation that betrayed they were leading not only strangers, but also their own shadows. Beowulf's men trudged behind, looking around, memorizing paths, forks in the road, escape routes. Habit.

As they reached the crest of the hill, Beowulf saw the hall for the first time. It stood in a hollow, larger than anything they had at home. The high wooden walls, the broad roof ridge with its carved animal heads at the ends, the iron-reinforced door—at first glance, it looked like a proud, old warrior, still puffing out his chest. But on closer inspection, one could see the grime on the posts, the dark stains under the roof, where it was hard to tell whether they were from smoke or something else. And above it all, very fine, almost invisible, hung a thin veil of gray air, which didn't seem like ordinary smoke, but like something that had lingered when it should have vanished long ago.

“Heorot,” said one of the guards, almost reverently. “The greatest hall between the seas.”

"Looks tired," Skari murmured.

Beowulf felt something tighten in his stomach. It wasn't respect, not really. More like the feeling of approaching an old, wounded enemy who hadn't yet decided whether to let you near or shove your throat down your spine.

At the gate, they were stopped by more guards, then the usual routine began: names, origins, intentions. Beowulf let them all speak, and when he finally opened his mouth, he did so without embellishment. "I am Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, a man who has seen more monsters than friendly embraces," he said. "I have heard that your king needs someone who is not afraid to stand in the dark when the rest are already under the tables. I am here to see if I can slay the thing that robs you of your sleep."

The guards looked at him as if they had decided he was either insane or exactly the type they needed. Insanity and necessity often look alike.

They let him and his men in. The smoke hit them like a wall. It was afternoon, but inside it was darker than outside. Torches cast yellow stains on beams, tables, faces. And over everything hung the smell that Beowulf recognized immediately: a mixture of old mead, sweaty fear, and that thin, metallic residue left behind by blood long after it has dried.

In the center of the hall, on the raised platform, sat Hrothgar. He seemed older than Beowulf had expected, older and more worn. Not only was his hair gray, but so was his gaze. Beside him stood a woman with an upright posture and a face that knew how to weep without anyone noticing. Wealththeow. Her eyes took in the newcomers with a quick, scrutinizing glance, as if she wanted to decide in seconds whether these men were hope or just additional baggage.

Beowulf took a few steps forward, his hand loosely on his sword hilt, his hip flask at his belt. He lowered his head just enough to show respect, but not servility. "Hrothgar, king of this hall," he said. "You don't know me. But you probably know my problem: I can't stand it when something comes through the door at night and eats people, and everyone acts like it's normal. So I'm here."

Hrothgar gazed at him for a long time. In his eyes lay weariness, mistrust, an old anger, and a tiny spark that might once have been hope. Then the king slowly raised the goblet, in which only a trickle of mead remained. "If you are truly here to confront this thing," he said softly, "then sit down. Drink. And listen to what it has done. Perhaps you will leave immediately. Or you may stay. And then we shall see what tears first: your courage or its teeth."

Beowulf reached for the hip flask, took a swig before sitting down. The liquor burned in his throat like a warning. He wiped his mouth, looked into the king's face, and thought: Fine. Finally, a house whose smoke is worse than mine.

He sat down, placed his hand on the table, and felt the trembling beneath it—not from him, but from the hall itself. Heorot was an animal that had been bitten before. He had come to see if it could clench its teeth again.

CHAPTER 4 – Beowulf enters the stage and does not stumble

The hall stared back. That was the first thing Beowulf noticed. Not the men's stares, not the smoke, not the smell of cold blood that hung over everything like a second skin. It was as if the wood had grown eyes. The beams, the walls, the carved animal heads on the roof—everything seemed to be waiting for this stranger to make some stupid mistake. One wrong step, one wrong word, and Heorot would simply spit him out like a fishbone.

Beowulf stopped, standing in the middle of the room, his cloak still half-open from the road, his boots full of sand. The men at the tables gradually fell silent. One put down his cup, another stopped chewing a piece of meat. It wasn't the reverential silence that skalds like to wax lyrical about. It was more like the silence in a tavern when a new thug walks in and nobody knows if he's any good or just a loudmouth.

Hrothgar took a moment to stand upright. The king was no wreck, but it was clear he had spent more nights with his own ghosts than with his wife over the past few winters. He rested his hands on the arms of his bench as if they were the edge of a deep hole. Beside him stood Wealhtheow, the only one in the hall with her back straight, as if her spine were of iron, not bone.

“You call yourself Beowulf,” said Hrothgar. His voice was rough, as if he had left it somewhere in a barrel. “The sea brought you here. Fate, perhaps. Or stupidity. Tell me, which of these three reasons is most likely?”

Beowulf grinned, not too broadly. A man who smiles too much looks like a merchant. "The sea hates us all," he said. "Fate doesn't speak to me. So stupidity remains. But it's the kind of stupidity that sometimes kills a monster."

A few of the Danes snorted, one laughed dryly. Hrothgar didn't flinch. "Sit down," he said. "If you've come to see our misery up close, at least do it with a full cup."

Wealththeow stepped forward, like a priestess of a very weary god. She held a large metal bowl, its rim dented by years of drunken hands banging it against all sorts of things. She handed the cup to Beowulf, and when their fingers touched, he felt that they were cold. Not trembling, just cold, as if they had stood too long beside an open grave.

“Welcome to Heorot,” she said in a voice that knew more order than hope. “Drink. We don’t have much left to offer. But there’s still mead. And stories. And anger.”

Beowulf took the cup and sniffed it briefly. The mead was strong, sweet, with a hint of sourness around the rim. Like most things in life, he thought. He took a long sip, letting the heat creep into him, but not too far. Getting drunk was for men who lived here. Guests who wanted to work at night had to keep their wits about them.

“Tell me about your enemy,” he said. “Rumors are like drunks: loud, contradictory, and in the end they lie somewhere in their own vomit. I want to know what it’s really like.”

The hall shook as if someone had thrown a stone into stagnant water. Men shifted on the benches, some staring at their hands, others up in the air. No one wanted to look in the direction of the issue that robbed them of sleep every night.

Hrothgar exhaled deeply. "You want a description?" he asked. "Fine. I won't give you a legend, I'll give you the filth. It comes at night, not every night, but often enough. It takes the door because walls bore it. It rips the bolt out as if it were made of butter. It is large..." He paused, searching for a word that wasn't taken from some old heroic poem. "Large as the lie of a man trying to boost his own courage. It has hands, if you can call them that: claws, fingers, whatever. They are swift, swifter than your swords. And its eyes see you as if you're already finished before you even get up."

He didn't speak loudly, but every word hung in the air like smoke. Beowulf saw some men unconsciously rub the scarred parts of their bodies. Others didn't move at all. These were the ones whose scars were no longer visible.

“And the smell,” a voice called from the corner. Beowulf turned his head. It was a thin fellow with sunken cheeks, probably one of the servants, someone who had seen more at night than half these warriors. “It smells like rotting cellar dreams,” he muttered. “Like bog and blood and cold sweat. You can’t sleep for days afterward because you think you can smell it.”

“That’s enough,” said Hrothgar. His hand on his cup was trembling. “We know what it smells like.”

Beowulf nodded slowly. The information sorted itself out in his mind. Size, speed, intelligence. Not a wild animal blindly snapping at meat, but something that almost gleefully divided its work among itself. A bastard child of nightmare and bad temper.

He put down the cup. "Good," he said. "Then we'll do it this way: Tonight, you all stay out of this hall. No one sleeps here, no one sits here, no one drinks to gain courage. You send your men home, to their own beds, to their wives, to their gods, to their walls. I'll stay in here with

my people and wait. When the thing comes, it won't get a herd of half-drunk victims, but a few men who know what bones are good for."

A murmur rippled through the row. One of the Danes slammed his fist on the table. "We're supposed to hand over our own hall to a stranger?" he growled. "Someone who's barely crossed the threshold?"

There it was, the voice of wounded pride. Every farm had one like that, a man who would rather take another drag than admit that the bottle was already hanging over his neck.

Beowulf turned to him slowly. "How many nights have you sat here getting drunk, while you drew people from the pews?" he asked. "How many are left who return to this hall, believing the walls will protect them?"

The man who had spoken turned red in the face. The hall suddenly felt smaller, more cramped. You could hear a few Hopes coughing in the background.

Hrothgar raised his hand. "Silence," he said. "He has the right to speak as he wishes. He hasn't been eaten from one of our tables yet."

A few men laughed bitterly. Wealththeow looked at Beowulf appraisingly. "And you?" she asked. "You don't expect it to be easy. You know death. It shows in your face. What will stop you from ending up tonight just like the others?"

Beowulf pulled the hip flask from his belt, turned it briefly in his hand as if considering whether to raise it in reply. Then he put it away again. "Nothing's stopping me," he said. "That's the joke. But I'm not here to live longer. I'm here to die more meaningfully. And sometimes you get surprisingly far with such endeavors."

He simply let the words fall into the room. No drumming, no shouting. Just a straightforward announcement: If need be, I'll die, but I'll take something with me. It was a language understood by men who had seen too many funerals.

“I want to be standing in here when it comes,” he added. “I want to see it, I want to smell it, I want to feel it fill the room. I want to know if it’s just another bastard to be torn apart by hand, or if the stories are true and we really do all live in a world where darkness wins.”

The hall was silent. It was a different kind of silence than before. No more resistance, more a cautious approach to the possibility that there was someone who was actually stupid enough to voluntarily stand in front of the hole through which the terror came.

Hrothgar leaned back. "You want them to fight without us," he said. "You want to turn our hall into a stage, and we'll sit outside in the rain waiting for the applause or the silence."

Beowulf shrugged. "You've been playing on your own stage these past few nights," he said. "You know the result. Let's see if my version does better."

Wealththeow looked at her husband. A silent discussion took place between them, a brief, swift battle of glances. At the end, she nodded almost imperceptibly. Hrothgar closed his eyes briefly, as if negotiating with an unseen judge. Then he said, "Very well. Tonight, Heorot is

yours. If you survive, you'll have more mead than is good for you, and whatever other gold I can find that isn't bound to the dead. If you die..."

“…then you’ll have one more name for your songs,” said Beowulf. “And perhaps one less monster.”

He held out his hand. Hrothgar hesitated for only a heartbeat, then struck. Two men's hands, knowing the feel of blood, met over a table that had seen more dead than anyone cared to count. The hall breathed a sigh of relief. The stage was set.

Beowulf did not stumble. He simply stood there, in the lingering torchlight, and the hall began to spin around him like an old planet that had suddenly gained a new, heavy star.

It was obvious that some idiot was going to have to open his mouth now. Every arena has that guy who can't stand it when someone else is the center of attention. Someone who measures his own importance by the volume of his dissent. Here, that idiot was called Unferth. The name was fitting: a bit off-kilter, a bit inappropriate, like a sword that's too short.

Unferth sat not far from the king, which was suspicious. Men like him gradually creep closer to power because they know where to curry favor and where to infight. His hair was cleaner than the others', his beard meticulously trimmed. His fingers were thinner, but his knuckles bore scars. He wasn't one of those spineless courtiers who only talked; he had bled, but for too long believed that would give him a right to respect.

He lifted the cup, swirled it gently so that the mead swirled lazily inside. "Very nice," he said with a smile that played only on his lips. "A stranger comes, drinks from our cup, makes grand promises, and wants our hall all to himself for the night. I'm touched. Almost as touched as the contents of my stomach."

A few men laughed dutifully. The kind of laugh you give when your direct supervisor tells a joke that isn't really a joke.

Beowulf slowly turned his head towards him. "And you are?" he asked.

“Unferth, son of someone you don’t know,” the man replied. “King’s confidant. Someone who saw blood flow in this hall long before you knew how to hold a hip flask properly.”

"Then congratulations," said Beowulf dryly. "You had the best view of the catastrophe."

That familiar laughter sounded again in the background, this time quieter. Unferth's face hardened slightly. He wasn't used to his barbs being brushed aside so easily.

“People tell stories about you,” he continued. “About races in the sea, about monsters you claim to have slain, about nights when you swam longer than a delusional fish. I’ve heard that. I’ve heard a lot. But do you know what else I heard? That you lost to Breca back then.”

Then the word he'd had on the tip of his tongue came out: lost. In a hall like this, that was worse than a curse.

Beowulf gazed at him silently for a while. The men unconsciously straightened, as if expecting a blow. Words, hands, it didn't matter.

“Ah, Breca,” Beowulf said finally. “Yes. That fellow. Tell me how it was; I love hearing my own stories from men who weren’t there.”

Unferth launched into his tale, clearly enjoying himself. He painted a vivid picture of two young fools in full armor who had plunged into the sea to see who could swim the longest. How the waves had tossed them about, how night fell, how finally one of them had been washed ashore while the other supposedly paddled away in triumph. In his version, Beowulf was the one who gave up first, the loud braggart who had shrunk to nothing in the water.

The longer he spoke, the more confident his voice became. Men like Unferth are addicts, but they draw their fix from attention. Every glance, every pursed lip was like a sip of mead to him.

When he was finished, he leaned back. "So much for your heroic deeds," he said smugly. "If you already back down against a human in the water, how do you expect to prevail here against something that doesn't even really belong to the world?"

The air grew thicker. Wealththeow looked back and forth between the two men, as if gauging how much blood would be spilled and in what way. Hrothgar rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, as if he knew perfectly well how pointless this exchange of blows was, yet was powerless to prevent it.

Beowulf took his cup and drank calmly. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked at Unferth, and spoke with a calmness worse than any rage. "Do you know what I love about skalds?" he asked. "They taste like mead when you drink them. Sweet, smooth, burning only briefly. But the next morning they're gone, and you're the one who wakes up with the hangover."

He put down his cup. “You want the truth about Breca? Fine. We went into the sea, yeah. In armor, with swords, with everything. Young idiots trying to prove they were tougher than the cold. It was night, and the sea decided it didn't like us both. The waves got higher, the wind got stronger, and somewhere in the middle, the fish must have thought, ‘Today there are two nice corpses for breakfast.’”

A few men grinned. He didn't speak like a skald, more like someone who had woken up in a dockside tavern yesterday.

“Then they came,” Beowulf continued. “Not one, not two. A whole fucking procession of things that live down there where no light reaches. Big mouths, long teeth, scales that feel like rusty iron. Breca was a good swimmer, oh yes. But he had both hands full with himself. I used my poor, drunken body and my sword to convince a few of those creatures that they’d better become vegetarians that evening.”

He paused briefly and looked directly at Unferth. “Seven. That’s how many I counted before the waves spat me out on some shore far from home. Seven dead monsters, a shredded suit of armor, a sword that never sounded the same again. Breca got there somewhere too, sure. Maybe sooner, maybe later, I don’t know. But do you see the difference? He swam for his life. I swam to kill something. If you consider that defeat, I want to see what your victory looks like.”

The laughter this time was different. It came from the heart, not from duty. Unferth's face grew paler. He searched for an answer, found none, only his own rage.

Beowulf leaned forward, his hands on the table, his voice deeper. “And you, Unferth, you hero of the king’s table, you man with clean hair and dirty teeth—what have you done? I hear you have slain blood relatives. That requires no sea, no monster, no storm. Just a fleeting whim and a knife. If you want to kill someone who trusts you, you don’t have to go far.”

The words landed like a punch. A few men stared at their cups as if they had suddenly become more interesting. Unferth's hand clenched around the handle of his drink, so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"Those are lies," he hissed.

“Perhaps,” said Beowulf. “Perhaps not. But it’s strange how the stories of your deeds sound ever darker as the evening progresses. Mine can be verified out in the water—if one has the courage to swim down. Whoever wants to verify yours must descend into graves.”

Wealththeow briefly placed her hand on the king's arm. Hrothgar sighed. "Enough," he said. "We've seen enough family blood. Tonight we need men who strike at the same target. Whether they like each other or not is of no concern to the dead."

Beowulf leaned back. "I'm not here to take your place, Unferth," he said, almost kindly. "You can sit at this table again tomorrow and pretend you've settled everything. I only want one night. One. Then we'll see who's left."

Unferth didn't answer anymore. He drank. Not slowly, not with relish, but as if he wanted to fill the hole inside him with mead before any more words fell into it.

The mood in the hall had shifted. The Danes now viewed Beowulf differently. Not as a strange stranger, but as a man willing not only to tell stories, but also to pay for them. The skepticism hadn't disappeared, but it had gained company: a cautious, almost hated hope.

Wealththeow stepped back into the center. She filled cups, spoke softly, almost like a mother sending her children out into a night she knows is too great for them. When she stood before Beowulf, she lingered a moment longer.

"You speak as if you're playing poker with death," she said. "As if he were just another guy at the table whose cards you can knock out if you're cheeky enough."

“Perhaps he is,” Beowulf replied. “I’ve often seen him sitting on the edge of the bed. Sometimes he leaves again if you look him in the eye. Sometimes he doesn’t. But he doesn’t like cowards. He gets bored with them.”

"Bore him tonight," she said. It didn't sound like a wish, more like an order.

Beowulf nodded. "I'll do what I can. And if not, at least you'll have a proper mess to clean up."

A crooked smile flickered at the corner of her mouth. "Our men are skilled at tidying up," she murmured. "Just not at preventing things."

The hall prepared for the inevitable, like a body that knows the blow is coming yet doesn't lower its chin. Men were led away, benches moved aside, weapons sorted. Beowulf chose those who would stay with him. Not all of them. Only those too stubborn by nature to even think of running at the word "monster."

He explained the plan to them: no armor, no heavy shields, just bodies, arms, and teeth. Swords if necessary, but not as a first choice. "The thing trusts in its own strength," he said. "So let it see ours. It expects men in iron hiding behind wood. We'll show it flesh that fights back."

Wulfgar grinned crookedly. "So, naked to death, eh?"

“Half-naked,” Beowulf corrected. “I don’t want it to think we’re completely crazy.”

They laughed, perhaps too loudly, but laughter is a good balm for nervousness. Still, in the corners of the men's eyes lingered the question no one asked: What if we're just fodder, only with better comebacks?

Beowulf sensed her fear and his own. He left her there. Those who drink away their fear end up empty-handed when things get serious.

The stage was set. And he stood in the middle, without stumbling. Not yet.

Evening crept slowly into the hall like another uninvited guest. Outside, the light dimmed, becoming a thin, dirty strip on the horizon, until even that vanished. Inside, the torches were lit one by one. The flames trembled at first, then settled into that tenacious, yellow stillness that says: We'll burn until someone breaks our necks.

Hrothgar clung to his resolve as if to a shaky railing. His men left Heorot, one by one, heads bowed, as if passing a bier. Some cast furtive glances back, others stared straight ahead, so as not to reveal how much they longed for the familiar shades. The hall had been both their affliction and their cure. Now they were to surrender it to a stranger who looked as if he would rather go for a smoke with Death than greet him politely.

Wealththeow organized the retreat, though no one called it that. She spoke softly to the women, pointing to children, the elderly, the injured. "You go home," she said. "Close the doors. Pray if you like. Or have a drink. But don't come back until the sun is up again, no matter what you hear."

The wind carried some of her sentences inside. Beowulf clearly heard the word "whatever." He liked it. It was honest. Most prayers didn't contain any "whatever."

When the Danes left, a strange silence remained. Heorot was still large, still full of smoke, but without the murmuring, the laughter, the clinking of cups, it was like seeing an old drunkard sitting alone on a bench, without an audience, without an excuse.

Beowulf and his men removed their armor. The metal clanged as they tossed it into a pile. They remained in shirts, trousers, bare forearms. Muscles, scars, bruises—a different kind of armor. Wulfgar rubbed his shoulders as if he missed the iron plates. “Feels like I’ve stripped off my own cage,” he muttered.

“Good cages don’t just keep enemies out,” Skari said. “They also keep you in. Maybe that’s for the best.”

Beowulf walked through the hall, examining the posts, the door, the torches. He took his time. Not because he had doubts, but because he was consciously savoring them. Doubt is like drinking: if you do it too quickly, you fall over. If you pace yourself, you'll get further.

He stopped in front of the door and placed his hand on the bolt. "It's staying up today," he said quietly. "If it wants to come in, it shouldn't say we made it difficult for it."

Wulfgar flared his nostrils. "You really want it to run right to our feet?"

“It will happen one way or another,” Beowulf replied. “If we make the door heavy for him, he will come angry. If we offer it to him, he will come arrogantly. I like arrogance. It makes things slow.”

They didn't lie down like victims waiting for the butcher. They sat down at the tables, placed their weapons within reach, and drank, but not to the point of unconsciousness. The hip flask was passed around, bestowing courage in small, burning doses. The men spoke softly, as if they were guests at a funeral where the deceased had not yet arrived.

"Do you think any of us will still be alive tomorrow?" Skari asked at some point.

“Certainly,” said Beowulf. “Otherwise this would just be a bad joke. And the gods like a good punchline.”

"I'm not talking about gods," Wulfgar growled. "I'm talking about us."

Beowulf gazed into the flames. "I know what a body feels like just before it breaks," he said. "I know when a man is only standing upright because his pride is climbing up his back. I don't see one here tonight who's already dead in the head. That's more than can be said for most."

They were silent for a while. The fire crackled, the smoke crept into their eyes, their hair, their memories. Beowulf thought of nights past: small battles in narrow alleyways, brawls in taverns where no one remembered why the first blow had been struck. He thought of men much bigger than him who had still ended up as piles of bones in the dirt. And he thought of that other feeling, which didn't come often, but when it did, it was like a knife: the moment you sense you're standing on the edge of something that might outlive you.

"You look as if you're thinking about that accursed Breca again," said Wulfgar, who had known Beowulf for a long time.

“No,” said Beowulf. “I think of death, and he looks disappointed when I visit him in my mind.”

Skari snorted. "Then disappoint him again tonight. I don't want him to get into a bad mood because of you. We all have to die sometime."

Later, Wealththeow returned. She was the last Danish woman to leave the hall. In her hands she carried a few things: a ring, a cup made of a finer metal, a cloth with woven patterns. Gifts, as custom dictated. But there was nothing of custom in her face.

She went from man to man, handing out the cup, placing rings in calloused hands, speaking soft words that no one could later accurately recall. Then she stood before Beowulf.

"Here," she said, holding out the cup to him. "For the one who stays awake tonight while everyone else tries to sleep."

He took it, took a sip, and gave it back. "When I die," he said, "you give it to the next idiot who shows up here to slay the monster. Maybe he'll do better."

“If you die,” she replied, “we might not have a cup left to give away.”

She took something from the cloth she held in her other hand: a short, wide knife, the blade dark, the handle smooth from use. "This belonged to my brother," she said. "He didn't use it very well. Perhaps you'll make better use of it."

Beowulf took the knife and weighed it in his hand. It felt comfortable there, as if it had always been meant to be. "I don't kill monsters with my brothers' knives," he said. "But I'll keep it. For later. If there is a later."

Wealththeow simply nodded. Then she looked at him for a long time, as if she wanted to memorize every detail of his face. Not because she found him handsome—beauty was no longer an issue here—but because one wants to remember the people who are foolish enough to risk something for you without having promised them their lives beforehand.

“Coming back alive,” she finally said, “would be a good way to get on our nerves. Go ahead and do it.”

She turned and went to the door. Before stepping out, she paused briefly, glancing back into the hall. For a moment, Beowulf felt as if she were apologizing to the beams for leaving them to a stranger for the night. Then she was gone, and the door clicked shut. The bolt remained up.

Night settled over Heorot like a wet blanket. The wind could now scratch undisturbed at the walls. Every now and then, a distant howl could be heard – perhaps wolves, perhaps just the old dog in some yard sensing that something was amiss in the air.

Beowulf's men found places to sit. Some actually lay down, their backs on the benches, their hands around the handles of their weapons. Others sat, their heads leaning against a post. It wasn't real sleep, more a kind of hunched-over state in which the body rested while the mind lay in wait.

Beowulf himself lay down closer to the fire. Not too close—too much light makes you an easy target—but close enough to feel the warmth on his back. He stretched out, his hands clasped beneath his head. His sword lay beside him, the hip flask a small, cold hump at his belt.

He wasn't thinking about fame, songs, or gold. He was thinking about the door, the bolt that stayed up, the thing out there that might already be on its way. He imagined it trudging through the swamp, through water that had sucked the feet out from under other men. How it warmed itself by their cries, how it remembered the hall like a familiar inn name.

He listened. The torches crackled, someone snored softly, someone else muttered something in their half-sleep about a woman who never returned. Beowulf's own heart beat slowly, heavily. Every movement of his lungs felt like lifting a weight.

"Come on," he muttered into the darkness. "I'm lying here like a set table. Don't keep the waiter waiting."

The night remained silent. But somewhere, deep out in the darkness, something stirred. A shadow among shadows, a hunger that stretched. The stage was set. The man lay in the center, awake behind half-closed eyes. And for the first time in a long time, Heorot had a guest who wanted more than just a drink.

CHAPTER 5 – Mead, Slaps, and Nasty Prophecies

Before the night truly took hold, it took one last lap around Heorot. That was always the way with nights that had something planned: they kept you waiting. They hung crookedly in the doorway for a while, smoked a cigarette, spat in the corner, and pretended to be completely relaxed, while in the background they were already sharpening their knives.

Beowulf sat at one of the tables, his back against a pillar, his shirt open, his forearms resting on the wood. His men had spread out like dogs sizing up the best spot before the gunfire. Wulfgar had made himself comfortable near the hearth, so everyone could see he wasn't cold. Skari was hunched half under the table, like someone who always needs to keep an eye on an escape route. The other Geats found themselves corners from which they could see both the door and the hearth fire.

The mead jug was still in the middle. It was ridiculous: they wanted to stay sober enough to punch a monster in the face, but no one had the nerve to abstain completely. So they drank slowly, like patients who know the medicine is doing them just as much harm as the disease. One sip against the cold, another against their thoughts, then they pushed the jug away again.

"This is the shittiest pre-dawn I've ever experienced," Wulfgar muttered, scratching his beard. "Normally, before big fights, there's at least music and women who pretend they'll miss you when you die."

"Today it's just us and a pile of wood," said Skari. "And that wood has heard more screams than any woman here."

Beowulf listened without saying much. He had his hip flask in front of him, but he barely touched it. He let his eyes wander: over the walls, the beams, the still soot-blackened patches on the ceiling where the smoke had lingered like old sins. The hall was too large to be comfortable, too small to give the horror room to spread. A perfect cage.

“Do you really think it’s coming?” asked one of the younger ones, a lad with slender shoulders but a big mouth. “Maybe it got wind of us being here and is staying in the swamp. It might not be looking for trouble.”

“No creature that voluntarily lives in snot and mire is afraid of trouble,” said Beowulf. “That would be like claiming that an inn without brawls is successful.”

“I once worked in a tavern without any fights,” Skari interjected. “For three months. Then they closed down. People want to see someone get their ass kicked, otherwise they won’t enjoy the mead.”

Wulfgar laughed roughly. "Then we're the evening's entertainment. For whoever out there is listening."

It was the kind of laughter that makes your throat feel a little tight. One of them, nicknamed "Bragi," a burly fellow with a crooked nose, took the jug, drank deeply, and his eyes grew glazed over, but clearer in the way they scanned everything. "I'm telling you," he grumbled, "this is how it'll go tonight: First, nothing happens. We sit here, get tired, argue, punch each other in the face. And just when we start to think it was all just a stupid joke, the bastard comes through the door and takes the one who snored the loudest."

"So you," said Skari.

Bragi was about to get up, but Beowulf just raised his hand, and that was enough. "Save your fists for the thing with the teeth," he said. "If any of you get your faces smashed in tonight, it'll be by me. And I'll do it in a way that you can still walk."

The men laughed again, this time a little more genuinely. It was like a shoe that's too tight and briefly stretches.

Against the wall, on a low stool, sat the Danish skald. The old man hadn't left with the others. No one had asked him why. Perhaps he'd forgotten to leave, perhaps he was simply tired of always telling stories and never being in the picture. His harp lay beside him, its strings limp like nerves after a long day. He stared into the fire, his face like dry leather left in the sun too long.

“You,” Beowulf called over to him. “Old voice. Are you singing tonight? Or are you fed up with your own shit?”

The skald raised his head. His eyes were red, but not just from the smoke. "There are nights when every song is a lie," he said. "Tonight is one of them."

“Then tell us a story from someone who knows she’s lying,” Wulfgar said. “Better that than this waiting.”

The old man snorted, then finally picked up the harp. His fingers trembled, but found their way. No grand heroic epic, no loud battle cries. The melody was flat, weary, but it crept through the room like a thin thread, binding the men to something greater than their fear.

He sang of halls that burned, of kings who had looked the other way, of men who thought they could bury their guilt under mead. He didn't name names; he could have named any name, and it would still have been true. His voice was raspy, sometimes it broke, then it recovered.

"Sounds like a funeral," Skari murmured.

"Perhaps it is one," said Beowulf.

Midway through the song, the skald stopped abruptly. A sharp, brief silence lingered. "There will be no ballad for tonight," he said. "What's happening here isn't mine. I only stayed because I wanted to see if anyone would dare to confront this thing head-on. People will talk later, no matter how it turns out. But in the end, the best stories are always written by the survivor."

“Then you’ll see me again later,” said Beowulf. “Perhaps you’ll need a new verse for your songs.”

The old man laughed maliciously. "Or a new verse for your eulogy."

The men pushed cups back and forth, played with their knives, and drummed their fingers on the wood. One of them took small bones from a bag, threw them onto the table, and read something in the way they fell.

"And?" asked Wulfgar. "What do the little white lies say?"

The bone thrower leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "They say we should get drunk and run away."

“That’s what they always say,” Skari remarked. “They’re not very creative.”

“They’ll say something else,” the man murmured, adjusting the bones with a finger. “One of us won’t see the rest. One of you…” He glanced briefly at Beowulf, then away. “…will learn the truth about themselves tonight.”

"Great news," said Beowulf. "Truth and I have had a strained relationship for years. It's nice that she's paying a visit today."

Wulfgar leaned forward, grabbed the bones, and threw them again. They fell differently, but the picture they presented was even worse: two close together, one far away, one alone.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

“That you cannot roll dice,” said Beowulf. “Pack that stuff away. If we die, it won’t be because some animal bones ordered it so.”

The skald chuckled softly. "The bones are more honest than you," he murmured. "You know that something will break tonight. Either the monster. Or your self-image."

“My self-image has been ruined for years,” Beowulf replied. “There’s not much left to gain.”

He stood up, stretched, and his spine creaked softly. The men automatically looked at him. Someone who stands up attracts attention – an old habit from taverns and battlefields.

“Listen,” he said. “Anyone who still thinks we’re sitting here to witness a miracle should go home and hide under their bed. We’re here to see if this thing from the bog bleeds as well as we do. Maybe it does. Maybe not. But if it gets us, at least its hands should know we fought

back. And if some pathetic crooner is running around tomorrow morning lying about how brave we were, at least he'll have a rough idea of where to start his lies."

A few men grunted in agreement. Wulfgar slammed his fist on the table. "I swear on everything I don't give a damn about," he said, "if that thing touches me, I'll bite off a piece of it."

"It will think twice about what you do," Skari said. "Maybe it will start with your teeth."

Beowulf grabbed the jug, drank, and set it down again. "No more whining," he said. "No more whispering. When it comes, let men hear it, not mice. Until then, we'll drink, but not until we're unconscious. And whoever lays a hand on anyone else will get a slap from me personally. I'll hand out the first slap tonight, not the monster."

It was like a small contract: he spoke, the men nodded, the hall absorbed the sound of this agreement. The wood was full of such pacts, Beowulf thought. Some had been kept, most hadn't. No matter. Promises are just air with better manners anyway.

A sharp bang on the door made everyone jump. It was just the wind slapping against the wood, but for a moment everyone froze, even the flames. Then life resumed, a little jerkily, like a drunk who can't find his way down the stairs.

Night hadn't yet fallen, but she had sent the first message. And Heorot was listening.

The hours that followed dragged on like thick dough. Nothing is longer than waiting when you know exactly what you're waiting for. If you don't know what's coming, you can at least tell yourself it'll all work out somehow. But here, the guest was known: large, smelly, hungry. Only the time was unclear.

The mead was slowly running out, which was perhaps a blessing. A few of the Geaten turned cups in their hands, as if they could tell when the visitors would arrive from the way the last drops clung to the rim. At some point, Wulfgar couldn't stand it any longer and stood up to work on one of the posts. First with the flat of his hand, then with his fist, and finally with his head.

"If you run into it two more times, the beam will fall over," Skari growled. "Then the monster won't even have to try anymore."

"I just don't want my arms to get rusty," Wulfgar grumbled, shaking out his hands. His knuckles were cracked, and small red drops ran down his skin. "When it comes, it should know that I've already practiced."

Bragi raised an eyebrow. "Don't practice on wood," he said. "Wood doesn't scream back. You'll become soft."

"You want to scream?" replied Wulfgar. "No problem."

Before anyone could react, he had grabbed Bragi by the collar and pulled him off the stool. The burly man landed roughly on his feet, his eyes immediately glazed with anger. It wasn't two heartbeats before the first fists clashed. Not a proper brawl, not an orderly wrestling

match, but that raw, untrained thud of bone on flesh that always sounds the same – whether in a royal hall or behind a stinking tavern.

“Damn it,” Beowulf muttered. He remained seated for another two strokes, watching Wulfgar and Bragi hammer at each other, the table shake, one of the younger men almost stepping in. Then he stood up.

He didn't intervene like a father separating his children. He simply stepped into the path of the next blow. Wulfgar, aiming for Bragi's head, instead struck Beowulf squarely in the forearm. It hurt, badly indeed, but Beowulf didn't move.

"If you're going to fight," he said calmly, "then at least do it with someone who deserves it."

Wulfgar cursed, Bragi huffed, and both paused. The others' eyes were glued to them. It was as if someone had briefly turned off the music.

"Sit down," Beowulf continued. "You'll hear enough bones cracking soon enough. Save yours for the guest."

Bragi was about to say something, something like, "But he started it," when he was struck by the open hand. Beowulf's slap came swiftly and sharply, without warning. The blow wasn't even particularly hard, but it was perfectly placed, more humiliation than injury. Bragi's head flew to the side, and his pride followed.

"That's the only slap that will be handed out by human hands in this hall tonight," said Beowulf. "The rest will be taken care of by whoever comes through the door. And if I see any of you waste your strength on another again, I'll personally make sure that you have to pick your teeth out of the ashes tomorrow morning."

The men looked at him: some offended, some relieved. Wulfgar rubbed his ankle and muttered something that sounded like, "Never mind." Bragi sat down, his cheek flushed, his ego even more so. Skari just grinned, leaned back, and said nothing.

The skald had followed the whole thing with a look that wavered somewhere between tired and interested. "That's how good stories begin," he said quietly. "With a man beating up his own people before he takes on demons. Listeners love that sort of thing. It shows that he's just an asshole, like them."

Beowulf looked over at him. "If it helps people listen later, you're welcome to sing me as an asshole," he said. "But make the verses about the monster a little louder. I want them to forget what I looked like."

"That can be arranged," said the old man. "People forget faces quickly. They only remember the way a story stays with them. Like a stone in a shoe."

A dull thunderclap from somewhere far away briefly made the ground vibrate. Perhaps it was a distant storm, perhaps just a boulder that had slipped from somewhere. Inside the hall, it sounded like the heavens clearing their throats.

"You don't happen to have a seer here?" Skari asked after a while, half-jokingly, half-seriously. "Someone who talks to entrails or stones. Maybe he can tell us whether it's worth staying awake."

A few of the Danes who had remained—two older warriors whom Hrothgar had sent to "keep an eye" on the strangers, and who were in truth simply too old to run fast anymore—exchanged glances. One of them, a gaunt man with sunken cheeks and a spear who looked like an old acquaintance, cleared his throat.

“There is one,” he said finally. “Half crazy, half useful. He usually sits on the edge of the village and pretends to hear the gods.”

"Bring him here," said Beowulf.

"He's not coming into the hall," replied the Dane. "He says the smoke is too full of lies for him."

Beowulf shrugged. "Then we'll just go outside."

"Now?" Wulfgar looked at him as if he'd suggested a walk in the moor. "What if the thing comes along right then?"

"Then it's out of luck," said Beowulf. "Then it will meet us in the open, and we'll have more room to twist its guts outwards."

The argument wasn't good, but it was loud. Two of the Danes muttered something about "I'll get him," and one disappeared to the door, pushed it open a crack, and slipped outside as if trying not to step on the toes of the darkness.

They waited. Again. Waiting within waiting. The air in the hall grew heavier, denser. Even the mead seemed to flow more slowly.

After a while, the door opened again. The Dane returned, and with him a man who looked as if he hadn't aged with the years, but merely grown thinner. His beard was gray and matted, his hair hanging in his face like wet threads. His eyes held that distant light that people have when they're unsure whether they still belong to the same world as everyone else.

"That's Osric," said the Dane. "He talks to things that no one can see."

“Most people talk to things no one can see,” Wulfgar growled. “They just call them gods to make it sound better.”

Osric stepped into the hall, paused briefly, and inhaled deeply. His face contorted. "It smells of anger in here," he muttered. "And old guilt. And of a laughing animal."

Beowulf looked at him and wordlessly handed him the hip flask. The old man took it, drank, coughed, and took another small sip. "This is no mead of the gods," he said, handing it back. "This is more honest."

"They say you can see things others don't want to see," Beowulf began. "Something will come through this door tonight. We're here to count its teeth. Can you tell us if it's worth buying new shoes afterward?"

Osric walked slowly through the hall, touching a pillar here, a bench there. It was as if he were stroking the ribs of an old friend. Then he stopped in front of the door, so close he could have touched the bolt. But he didn't.

"It's coming," he said softly. "Not because you are here, but in spite of your presence. It doesn't know you. It only knows what this hall has done. It's coming because of the screams that are lodged in the beams. Because of the lies that were told in the nights. Because of the traces of blood that were washed away, but not from the eyes of those who have died."

"Sounds like a god who collects interest," Skari said.

Osric shook his head. "Gods don't concern themselves with individual halls. They cast storms, plagues, bad harvests. This thing here is smaller. More personal. Like a dog that's learned there's meat here if it growls loud enough."

Wulfgar put his hands on his hips. "So? What does your great prophecy say? Do we all die? Do we die halfway? Do we only die inside?"

Osric looked at him, for a long time, as if counting the bones beneath his skin. Then he turned to Beowulf. "You have toyed with death many times," he said. "He knows your face. Tonight he will stand beside you. Perhaps he will reach out, perhaps he will let go. But he will laugh. He always laughs when someone thinks they can bargain with him."

Beowulf let that sink in for a moment. "I knew that even without you," he then said.

“I’ll tell you something else you know but don’t like to hear,” Osric continued. “Even if you win, this hall still loses. There are wounds that stay in the wood. The men here will use your story like a bandage until it stinks. They’ll say, ‘We had a hero. Look how brave we are.’ And they’ll never talk about why this thing was even able to happen here in the first place.”

The silence that followed was sharper than any blade.

"So it doesn't matter what we do?" Skari asked.

“Nothing is irrelevant,” Osric said. “Not to you. It is to the world. It keeps turning whether you’re here eating each other or being eaten by a monster. But if you think you’re fighting for more than your own way of getting through the night, you’re lying. You fight because you can’t do otherwise. Because you have fists inside you, and otherwise they’ll beat you from the inside out.”

Beowulf grinned. "That's the first honest prophecy I've ever heard," he said. "You're a lousy seer. But a good drinker."

Osric nodded, as if that was exactly what he wanted to hear. "Don't ask any more questions," he said. "It will come when it comes. And when it leaves, something will remain here. With or without you."

He turned, limped to the door, paused briefly, and looked into the flickering hall. "I won't be here when it happens," he said. "I've heard enough screams already. But I will listen. And if any of you are still running tomorrow morning, I'll come back. Then I'll tell you what I heard during the night when you were too busy to listen."

He left. The door closed again. The bolt remained up.

"The old bastard scares me more than the monster," Wulfgar muttered.

"That's good," said Beowulf. "Fear keeps you awake. And awake is better than dead."

Night had now arrived directly outside the hall, without delay. And every man still holding a cup noticed that it had grown heavier. Not from the mead. From what was to come.

After Osric left, a true silence fell. Not the intermittent silence punctuated by laughter, curses, and the clinking of cups. But a deep, heavy silence in which even the smallest sounds become amplified: the creaking of a beam, the scraping of a boot, the sigh of a man trying to hide his fear.

The skald had laid his harp aside. His hands rested on his knees, his fingers slightly curled, as if waiting to grasp something that wasn't there. He didn't look like a singer, more like someone who had stood around at too many funerals without knowing what to say.

Beowulf felt weariness begin to tug at him. Not physically—his body was still ready, perhaps even too ready. It was that other kind of weariness that creeps into your brain when you sit too long in a room that reeks of anticipation. He knew it from nights before battles: the hours leading up to them are worse than the hours when someone is actually trying to open your chest.

"Sleep is overrated," he said to the group. "But those who close their eyes for a while might die a little later."

A few of the men lay down, as he had done before: not properly, but half-lying down, always with one hand on the handle of his weapon, one ear open. Others remained seated, staring into the flames as if they could already see what was about to come through the door.

Wulfgar sat down next to Beowulf and let his back slump against the post. "If I die," he said, "I only want you to mention in every song that my beard was better than yours."

Beowulf raised an eyebrow. "If you're mentioned in the song, it's only because you were in the way," he said.

"Better in the way than invisible," Wulfgar muttered.

Skari lay on his back, his hands clasped behind his head, as if he were lying in a summer meadow counting clouds. "I don't want to be in any song," he said. "I want people to say later, 'There was this skinny guy there, nobody knows his name, but he survived.' That's enough for me."

“You’ll find your place in the wrong verse,” Beowulf said. “No one escapes gossip. Not even those who deserve it.”

The skald cleared his throat. "I could promise you something," he said softly. "If any of you do something worthwhile tonight, I will sing about it. And if no one does anything, I will sing anyway. People want stories, not truth."

“At least give us a chance to corrupt the truth before you sing it away,” said Beowulf. “Don’t start until the blood is on the ground. Otherwise, you’ll confuse who ate whom.”

A torch on the wall hissed as the resin within it found a new path. The flame flickered, casting shadows across Beowulf's face, making him look older for a moment. Not in years, but in miles.

He closed his eyes, not to sleep, but to process the sounds. The crackling of the fire. The soft shifting of a man turning in his sleep. A distant howl creeping through the cracks in the hall. The wind tugging impatiently at the walls.

He thought of Osric's words: "You fight because you have no other choice." There was something to that. He could have stayed over there with his own people, hanging around in some port city, fighting, drinking, forgetting women before he'd even learned their names. But then the monster would have kept ravaging here, night after night. And somewhere in Beowulf's skull, there was a small, stubborn spot that couldn't stand that sort of thing.

“Do you remember,” Wulfgar murmured beside him, “the night in the harbor hall when we thought the innkeeper was a demon because he charged us double?”

Beowulf grinned without opening his eyes. "Well, in a way he was. The guy couldn't count and still wanted to earn like a king."

"You pulled the table over his head," said Wulfgar. "His son wanted to attack you with the cleaver."

"And you knocked the knife out of his hand and ran in yourself," Skari added from behind. "You could only eat soft foods for two weeks."

The men laughed softly. It was good to hear Death laugh at old, ridiculous episodes before he himself spoke again.

"If this thing comes," Wulfgar said after a while, more seriously now, "and it gets me first, don't play the hero and try to pull me out. I've been through enough crap already. If I go, I'll go fast. Waste your arms on something more useful."

“I waste nothing,” Beowulf murmured. “If it takes you first, I’ll at least put my hand in its mouth. I want to know what it feels like.”

"You are sick," said Skari.

“Sure,” said Beowulf. “Healthy men don’t voluntarily sit in someone else’s hall and wait for a glutton from the swamp.”

The skald had picked up his harp again, not to play loudly, but rather to keep his fingers occupied. The strings produced only soft, almost inaudible sounds, a thin humming that mingled with the smoke.

“I once had a dream about a dragon,” he said suddenly. “A long time ago. I was young enough to still believe in omens. The beast was lying on a mountain of gold, like you'd expect. Except the gold wasn't coins, it was teeth. Human teeth. The dragon didn't say anything, it just breathed. Every breath was a new war.”

“Great story,” said Skari. “That’s exactly what we need right now – more creatures in our heads while we wait for one to appear outside our door.”

"Shut up, skinny guy," Wulfgar muttered. "At least the old man has some style."

Beowulf listened to the fragments. Dragons, gold, teeth. All motifs the world loved to play with when it deceived men into believing they could be more than mere flesh and blood. He didn't yet know that his own path would one day end with a dragon. And perhaps that was for the best. One who looks too far into the future stumbles in the present.

The weariness settled heavier over him, like an animal landing on your chest. He forced himself to stay awake, opened his eyes again, and looked at the door. The bolt was still up, the wood still. No scratching, no pressure, no shadow. Just a patch of dark surface pretending to be innocent.

"Maybe it's not in the mood today," muttered one of the younger ones.

“Perhaps you are already dead and don’t realize it,” Wulfgar replied. “Dead people also think the night will never end.”

Beowulf got up again. He couldn't lie there any longer. The waiting was eating away at him more than any fight. He went to the door, placed his hand flat against the wood, and felt the cold behind it. It was as if he were placing his hand against the skin of a large, sleeping animal. No pulse. Not yet.

He leaned his forehead against it briefly, closed his eyes. No prayer, no silent wish. Just one thought: If you're going to come, then come properly. No half measures.

As he turned around, he saw that the skald had been watching him. “You are not here to die,” said the old man. “You are here to see how far you can go before you fall. That is a difference. A small one, but it keeps you on your feet.”

"And you?" asked Beowulf. "Why did you stay?"

The skald shrugged his bony shoulders. “All my life I’ve sung about other men who were brave, or pretended to be. I wanted to see what it’s like when someone actually stays when things get serious. Not just for the first drink, but until the last cry.”

"Then listen carefully," said Beowulf. "Perhaps tonight you will hear the verses you have grown too old to hear."

He went back to his seat, sat down again, took out his hip flask, and took a sip, just one. The liquor was lukewarm, but it still burned.

The hall breathed shallowly. Every man who was still awake no longer listened to the voices of others, but to those of the beams, the walls, the wind. And somewhere beyond, far out in the darkness, was another kind of breathing. Slower, heavier.

The foul prophecies now hung in the air like smoke. Osric's words, the bones on the table, the skald's songs, Hrothgar's silent gaze, Wealththeow's cold hand. Everything mingled into a thick, invisible sludge that the men inhaled, whether they wanted to or not.

“When we get out of here,” Skari said quietly, almost to himself, “I’m going to stop stealing.”

Wulfgar laughed hoarsely. "And me with the drinking."

Beowulf grinned. "And me with the lies."

All three of them knew that wouldn't happen. Vows made at night are like foam on mead: they look like something for a moment and disappear as soon as the sun comes up.

The hours dragged on. The sky outside was nothing but a black shroud. Sometime between two breaths, between two torch hits, Beowulf heard it. A sound so deep it resonated in his bones rather than his ears. No wind, no thunder.

Something had decided that the waiting was over.

He sat up, placed his hand on the sword, and felt his fingers grow still. All the cheap prophecies, all the bad jokes, all the slaps from the evening fell away from him like old dust. All that remained was what was truly inside him: a man who wanted to see if there was a boundary between him and the thing in the dark—and which of the two would cross it first.

The night held its breath. Heorot, too. And somewhere outside the door, a footstep landed on the ground, heavy, wet, certain.

CHAPTER 6 – Grendel arrives without knocking

The first step was just a sound, easily missed. A dull thud somewhere outside, like a wet sack falling to the ground. Perhaps a branch, perhaps a stone, perhaps the sky shedding a small piece of itself. But Beowulf had waited like a dog all day for a single knock. He didn't just hear the sound, he felt it. He started as if someone had plucked a string deep inside him.

The others took a few heartbeats longer. Wulfgar was the first to stop drinking. Skari stopped mid-sentence. The skald placed his hand very slowly on his harp, as if suddenly afraid it might scream. The torches flickered, not intensely, just enough to lengthen and draw closer the shadows on the walls.

The second step was more distinct. Heavier. Wetter. Something was scraping in the dirt in front of the hall. Not a normal step, not a hoof, not wheels. It was the sound of a body too big, too heavy, too wrong for this world, and yet it had decided to use it.

Wulfgar whispered: "There it is."

Beowulf raised his hand without looking. "No whispering," he said. "If you're going to open your mouth, then do it properly. Let it know we're awake." His voice was calm, deeper than usual. He stood now, barefoot on the cold hall floor, his shirt open, his sword still scabbarded. He looked like a man who needs to use the bathroom on the wrong night and realizes on the way that Death is standing in the hallway. Except he couldn't turn back. Not anymore.

The footsteps drew nearer. One. Another. The gait was uneven. Something was limping, something was dragging. It was as if half a mountain were trying to play at being an animal. Briefly, a deep, guttural sound could be heard, so muffled that the planks beneath one's feet vibrated slightly. It was neither a growl nor a laugh, but something in between. A sound that said: I know exactly what's going on in here. I've been here many times before.

The last step before the door wasn't a step at all, but a stop. Sudden silence. The thing stood right in front of them, no more than a hand's breadth of wood, a few nails, and a handful of air away. The hall's interior held its breath. Even the fire crackled only very gently, like a child who realizes it's been too loud.

Beowulf walked to the door. He didn't walk slowly, nor quickly. Simply at the pace of men who have made a decision and are done with the rest. His men wanted to say something, to stop him, to accompany him—they didn't. He hadn't given any orders, but the room knew that this path had to be walked alone.

He stopped an arm's length from the door. He placed his hand flat against the wood again, as before, but this time the wood trembled back. Not strongly, just a touch. As if another palm were pressing against it from the outside. Two bodies, separated by a thin, weary wooden structure that suddenly seemed insufficient.

“Grendel,” said Beowulf. The name was spoken in his voice for the first time. No whisper, no emphasis, no curse. Just the bare name. “You’re late. We’ve been stood up more rudely.”

Whatever stood outside didn't answer with words. But it moved. A very slight pressure against the door, as if someone were testing how much resistance there was. Wood creaked, the bolt vibrated, even though it remained in the up position.

Beowulf turned halfway to the others. "Now is the moment," he said calmly, "when you decide whether you are the men mentioned in the song, or those no one speaks of. I guarantee no one will be breathing tomorrow morning. But I guarantee that tonight we will not be nothing but walking food."

Wulfgar stood up, grinding his teeth. "I've never eaten good food," he growled. "Too tough, too much gristle."

Skari rose more slowly. "So be it," he said. "I never wanted to get old anyway. Old thieves are ridiculous."

The other Geaten adjusted the benches, positioning them to provide cover without confining them. A rough, semicircular chaos around the door, gaps to move through, corners to briefly disappear into if a blow landed too low. It wasn't a plan drawn up by a general. It was the order of men who had improvised far too often and were still alive to tell the tale.

Outside, a slow scraping sound began. Not on the boards, but deeper. As if something with blunt, heavy claws were driving its way through the floor itself. You could feel it beneath your feet. The hall was old; the beams had endured battles, feasts, and storms. Now it vibrated as if someone had crumpled up its past and squeezed it into a fist.

The bolt moved. Not from the inside. It twitched briefly, as if someone from the outside had nudged it. Then silence again.

"It knows we're awake," Skari murmured. "It's playing with us."

“Then we play back,” said Beowulf. He turned again to the door, stretched out his fingers as if to shake hands with the thing outside. “Come,” he said, half aloud, half just into the cracks. “We’ve been waiting for you, you stinking bastard.”

As if that word had been the final drop into an overflowing cup, it happened. The bolt sprang upwards, as if someone had struck it from below with a sword. The sound was short and ugly, like a bone breaking. The door didn't fly open—it was flung open. A difference. It slammed against the inner wall, the wood splintered, an old crack widened.

Night fell into the hall. Not as air, not as darkness, but as a physical presence. Cold, damp air rushed in, mingling with the smoke, making it thinner, more swallowable. And right in the middle of this void stood Grendel.

It was as if a nightmare were trying to take shape. Large, yes. But not just large. Wrong. The body didn't conform to the proportions one was used to. The arms too long, the legs too thick, the torso a shapeless beam of flesh and sinew. The skin shimmered dark, greenish, brownish, somewhere between rotten wood and wet stone. Moist and shiny, as if it had never quite dried.

The hands—if you could call them that—were the worst part. Each finger as thick as a forearm, the nails long, black, and brittle. Clinging to the creases was something that had once been blood, other things that had once been clothing, skin, hair. Grendel leaned briefly against the door, as if checking if it was still there, then stepped inside.

The smell hit her like a blow. Not just decay, not just swamp. It was as if the stench of all bad nights, all secret fears, all spilled drinks, burst from his mouth in a single breath. A mixture of cold sweat, rotting flesh, and metallic iron, so strong it made your saliva clot.

Wulfgar gagged, straining to hold his nerve. Skari clenched his teeth so tightly they crunched. Beowulf didn't blink. His eyes burned, but they remained open.

Then Grendel raised his head. And the moment they saw his eyes, they knew this was no stupid animal. There was no red-hot, blindly raging hatred. His eyes were yellowish, dull as old grease, but they held a cold, deliberate gaze. No anger. No madness. Just a deep-seated, world-weary contempt. Like that of a man who's been coming to the same dingy shop for years and knows exactly where the bottles are.

He looked around. Not frantically, not frantically. A sweeping look, the kind men have who are used to a room. Except this room hated him. The beams creaked as if they instinctively wanted to bend away from him.

The soldiers stood still. Some with their weapons drawn, others still with their hands on the handles. No one was running. Not yet. Grendel seemed to register them, but he was in no hurry. For a moment, it seemed as if he were considering whether he even felt like doing any work this evening.

Then he reached out.

The initial movement was so swift it went unseen. Only the result. A young Geate, whom Beowulf had known for only a few months, was standing a little too far forward. Grendel's hand shot out, seized him by the hip, and lifted him up as if he were a poorly carved wooden toy. The man screamed, lashed out, and hacked with his knife. The blade slid into Grendel's forearm and lodged in the flesh as if it had lost its way. No reaction.

Grendel squeezed. The ugly, dry crack of pelvis and ribs could be heard before the scream broke off. Then the monster hurled the lifeless body sideways against a post. The impact made the whole hall tremble. Something on the ceiling came loose—dust, old cobwebs, perhaps the remains of a prayer.

The moment the body hit the ground, the first second was over. The second in which it's decided whether men freeze or react.

Beowulf reacted.

He didn't shout. He didn't run blindly forward. He took a step, just one, and positioned himself sideways between Grendel and the center of the hall. Suddenly, he wasn't just any stranger anymore. He was merely a silhouette in the torchlight, a sharply defined outline that refused to move aside.

“Here, you ugly son of a bad dream,” he said roughly, almost hoarsely. “Try someone who hits back.”

Grendel's head turned toward him. Not abruptly, but slowly, as if he were moving his attention like a heavy stone. His eyes lingered briefly on Beowulf. There was no shock in his gaze at someone's presence. Rather, a kind of… interest. The kind you get when a piece of furniture suddenly springs back.

Wulfgar took a step forward, but Beowulf raised his hand without taking his eyes off the monster. "Not yet," he murmured. "It wants me. So let it have me."

Grendel took another step inward. The torches on the wall flickered as his shadow rolled across them. The floorboards creaked. The beams, somewhere above them, cracked as if the wood were remembering a previous blow.

The night was now in the heart of Heorot. It had a body, a name, teeth. And it was no longer outside.

Beowulf felt his heart like a fist in his chest. It didn't beat faster, just harder. The hip flask at his belt pressed coldly against his hip. The sword at his side suddenly felt far too light.

"Come," he said again, more to himself than to Grendel. "Come on, you bastard. Let's see who eats whom."

And Grendel came. Without knocking. Without haste. With that bleak self-evidence of a problem that knows most people always react too late anyway.

The hall was still holding its breath. But the air was already thick with blood.

Grendel's second move was no longer a test, but work. He stepped even deeper into the hall, so that the fire illuminated him from below. Shadows crept across his body like living tattoos. His skin shimmered as if someone had dragged wet mud onto bones. Water dripped from the furrows—swamp, something dark that might once have been water before it had talked to corpses for too long.

He shoved a table aside with his hip, as if it were nothing. The piece of furniture crashed against the wall, shattered, and mead, wood splinters, and old grease flew through the air. Two people were swept away by the force, tumbled down, and gasped for breath as they got back up. One clutched his arm, which was bent at an angle that bones dislike.

"Don't look," growled Beowulf, more for the others than for himself. "If you stare at the first horror, you'll miss the second."

Grendel grabbed with both hands this time. With his left, he lunged at a Dane who had been standing too close to the benches; with his right, he lunged at a Geaten who had learned in old battles that sometimes it's better to duck. Except there were hardly any hiding places against such large hands.

The Dane had no time to even grasp what was gripping him. Grendel's fingers closed, and the man was nothing more than a bundle of bone and cloth, wriggling in the air before disappearing somewhere behind an overturned table. The Geate at least had the reflex to strike with his sword. The blade slid against the monster's hand, a clean, practiced blow. Sparks flew. Metal scraped against something that wasn't simply flesh. The blade ricocheted as if it had struck a stone.

Grendel reacted. Not with pain—with irritation. As if a fly had bitten him in the eye. He didn't drop the Geaten. He slammed it with the full force of his arm against the post next to the hearth fire. Just once. The post held, the man didn't. He slumped to the ground, his eyes wide open, as if they wanted to go somewhere other than where his body was.

"That's enough," Skari hissed. "We have to get on it."

“Not yet,” Beowulf repeated, but his voice was more strained. He saw how the men were fighting: not just against Grendel, but against themselves. The instinct to attack immediately was strong. But something inside them also knew that this thing didn't function like an ordinary opponent.

Grendel made a noise, a deep, rolling something that might have been laughter. It vibrated through the room, causing dust to trickle from the ceiling. He had satisfied his initial hunger, a little. But it was obvious that wasn't why he had come. He wasn't here simply to eat. He was here to show that he could.

He turned to the hearth. The fire was the heart of Heorot, the place where stories were cooked. Grendel lifted his foot—if one could call this misshapen lump of flesh and horn that—and placed it in the middle of the embers. The flames hissed, parted briefly, then licked at his skin.

The stench that rose was worse than before: burnt bog, wet scales, a whiff of shattered dreams.

He didn't seem to notice. Or he didn't care. He stood in the middle of the fire as if it were just another swamp. And then, finally, he turned completely to face Beowulf.

They stood facing each other, perhaps three or four paces apart. The torches cast their light so that Grendel was illuminated from behind and Beowulf from the front. Two shadows, each trying to fill the other.

"Well then," murmured Beowulf. "Now let's look at each other."

He drew the sword. Slowly. No dramatic hiss, no raised arm. The blade slid from the scabbard like something that knew exactly what it was made for. Light refracted off nicks, old bloodstains, and ingrained sweat.

Grendel reacted to the bare steel with an almost human head movement: a tiny retraction of his chin, as if he were assessing something. There was no fear of metal in his eyes. More like, "Oh, not this too."

Beowulf didn't lunge. He moved sideways, seeking the angle he knew: not directly, never directly. Great opponents expect direct blows. They're used to being jumped on headfirst, because courage and stupidity look so similar.

He turned left, forcing Grendel to turn around. The monster did so. Slowly, but effortlessly. He followed Beowulf with the same gaze as if watching an insect that, for some reason, refused to fly into the flames.

Beowulf's men moved behind him. Wulfgar had gone to the right, Bragi kept more to the left, and Skari was half-disappeared in the shadow of an overturned table. They closed the circle as best they could without getting in each other's way.

Grendel snapped.

This time, Beowulf was the target. The monster's right hand shot forward, faster than this body should have been able to move. No tester, no plucking. A grip designed to take a body whole.

Beowulf had been expecting this very moment. He didn't jump away. He would have been too slow. Instead, he continued the monster's movement. One step forward, under the arm, not away from it. He smelled the breath, felt the cold, damp air surrounding Grendel's body like a second skin. He was suddenly so close he could see the texture of the skin: a mixture of scarred leather, fish scales, and something that looked like dried mud.

The hand swept past him, catching only air. Grendel pulled it back, irritated. It was perhaps the first time in a long time that something had been away from him without being far away.

"Now," growled Beowulf.

Not loud, but it was enough. Wulfgar came from the right, sword raised, and struck Grendel's knee. It was a blow that had already split other opponents in two. The blade struck something

hard, tearing the skin, a gush of dark fluid spurted out, almost black in the torchlight. Not blood as they knew it. Thicker, more slimy.

Grendel roared. Not in pain—in surprise. The sound was deeper than anything they had ever heard before. The hall vibrated as if someone were drumming inside the beam. Wulfgar was almost thrown back by the shockwave.

Bragi seized the moment and leaped forward, ramming his spear into Grendel's side, just below the ribs, if one could even call that thing ribs. The spear went in deeper than expected and lodged. Bragi tried to pull it out, but something inside held it fast.

"Shit," he cursed. "I'm in."

Grendel's right arm shot back as if to shake off a bothersome mosquito. Bragi let go, just in time. The spear wobbled, now sticking halfway out of the monster's body, like a poorly set flag.

Skari emerged from the shadows like a forgotten thought. He didn't throw a knife; he ran. He carried only a short dagger, but he aimed it at the point where Grendel's shoulder meets his neck, where major veins run in humans. The blade slid in, not deep enough, but deep enough to make the monster roar again. This time, there was pain.

Grendel lashed out. His left hand flew across the air, a wild, broad swipe. Skari was too close, too slow. The claws didn't just graze him, they almost swept him away. He spun in the air as if he were a sack that had fallen from a horse, landed hard on the ground, rolled, and lay still.

"Skari!" roared Wulfgar.

"Leave him be," growled Beowulf. "If he's dead, there's nothing we can do. If he's alive, let him lie there."

He knew the thin man was still breathing. He saw the trembling in his shoulders, the slight twitch of a hand. But there was no time for sentimentality.

Grendel now had several wounds. Black, viscous fluid dripped from his knee onto the floor, it ran more slowly from his side, and it seeped from his shoulder. The stench grew sharper, now tinged with a new note: burnt flesh, cut tendons, startled death.

He wasn't staggering. Not yet. But something about his movements had become heavier. His foot in the hearth fire shifted embers and coals, sparks flew through the hall, some landing on tabletops, some on hands. No one paid any attention.

Beowulf stayed close. He remained within range the entire time, just outside Grendel's direct grasp. He moved like a boxer who had learned that death lies in the big swings. Small steps, turns, always keeping him the center of attention.

"See, bastard?" he growled. "We're not cows in armor. We bite back."

Grendel snorted, if you could call it that. A rush of moist air burst from his nostrils—or what looked like them—and with it came a splash of that dark liquid. A few drops hit Beowulf's arm. It stung. Not like fire, but like a mixture of salt and vinegar in a deep wound.

He flinched slightly, more out of reflex than pain, but he didn't drop the sword. Instead, he rammed the blade into Grendel's body at hip level. Not an elegant thrust, but a furious, brutal shove. Metal ripped through skin, through tissue, striking something hard inside, perhaps bone, perhaps something else.

Grendel writhed. His back arched, his shoulders tensed, his muscles twitched beneath his skin like snakes in the dirt. A sound burst from him, somewhere between a roar and a gurgle. Beowulf ripped the sword out again, black phlegm spurting into his face and eyes. It burned like hell.

The world briefly became a blurry patch of red, yellow, and black. He blinked, rubbed his eyes with his forearm, wiping more dirt in than out. But with each movement, the image cleared a little more.

"Beowulf!" roared Wulfgar. "Left!"

Grendel's arm came again. This time it wasn't aimed at Bragi or Skari. It was aimed directly at Beowulf, a flat, open hand, ready to slap him against the wall like a fly.

Beowulf ducked, but not enough. The claws swept across his shoulder, tearing fabric, skin, flesh. A hot, searing pain shot through his side. He felt warm blood running down his back. The blow threw him sideways, against the edge of the table, which creaked under his weight.

He fell to the ground, rolled, and got up again, half-kneeling. His shoulder throbbed, his shirt clung to him. His breath was short, but not broken.

Grendel took a step toward him, a heavy, determined step, his foot crunching through burnt embers and blackened pools. The spear in his side wobbled, the dagger in his shoulder threatened to fall out. The wounds hadn't stopped him, but they had changed him. His movements were less playful now, less arrogant. More… focused.

Beowulf grinned crookedly, despite the pain. "Come on," he panted. "Now it's getting interesting."

The men around him gasped, as if to say something, but the moment allowed no words. The next blow, the next move, the next wrong step could decide everything.

Grendel bent over, his long arms outstretched, his fingers spread, as if he wanted to take him in one piece, knead him, break him, keep him.

And Beowulf, half kneeling, half standing, prepared to, for the first time in his life, not to evade, but to seize.

Night had almost completely swallowed the room. Only the fire and a few torches still offered any resistance. And in the middle of this flickering, stinking twilight, a man and a monster stood facing each other, both bleeding, both with that silent, stubborn will in their eyes that the other should be the one to fall first.

There's that moment in every fight when everything boils down to a single decision. All the blows before, the footsteps, the curses, the chance occurrences—they all converge into a single line pointing to one spot. If your breathing is off then, it's all for nothing. Beowulf

sensed that this was the moment. It wasn't a divine sign, no whisper in his ear. Just a raw, clear knowing in his gut that said: If you back down now, you'll never look anyone in the eye again.

Grendel's hands approached him, as large as doors. One from the right, one from the left, an embrace with no escape. The air before them was already cold, damp, heavy. In this embrace, men had burst like overfilled hoses.

Beowulf didn't stand up completely. He didn't jump aside either. He did something no sane person would have done: he went inside.

The moment Grendel's hands reached for him, he leaped forward, pushing off the ground with his toes and throwing his torso between the monster's arms. He felt the claws brush against his back, as if they were about to snap at him, grasping at nothing. The stench was all there was now: swamp, blood, burnt flesh, ancient fear. It was as if he were leaping into the mouth of a rotting world.

He grabbed hold. Not with the sword—it hung uselessly at his side now, too low, too awkwardly. He placed his hands on Grendel's right arm, where the forearm met the upper arm, directly in front of the monstrous shoulder. His fingers closed around skin and tendons, slid briefly over mucus, found a grip that should have been nonexistent.

Grendel's body reacted instantly. The muscles beneath his skin twitched, tensed, threatening to pull his arm back, away from this unexpected resistance. Normally, there was nothing there to hold him. No door to stop him, no bolt to resist him, no human hand that offered more than a brief resistance to be crushed.

This time it was different.

Beowulf poured everything into his body: legs, back, shoulders, anger, the hangover of a hundred acres, the laughter of men who would never laugh again, the faces of those taken by that creature. He didn't just pull Grendel's arm down—he anchored himself to it.

"Now!" he roared, and his voice was raw like an open bone.

Wulfgar reacted first. He was always the first to throw himself into a storm. He leaped sideways, seized Grendel's forearm below Beowulf, his burly hands digging into the slippery flesh. Bragi threw himself against the shoulder, right where the spear was still half-embedded. The spear burrowed deeper, an ugly, wet sound, like driving a stake into overly compacted soil.

Grendel screamed. Now it was pain, unmistakably. The sound was so deep that the air in her lungs vibrated. The torches on the walls sprayed sparks; some went out briefly, then flickered again.

The monstrous body tried to right itself, to throw up its arm, to shake off the bothersome, miniature parasites. But there was something it hadn't expected: resistance. Not individually, not one after the other, but together. Three men on one arm, the weight of their bodies, the fury of their will.

Beowulf continued to roar, not in words, just a sound that came from the depths and wanted nothing more than to hold on. The wound in his shoulder burned, his back was covered in blood, his fingers felt as if someone were cutting between their bones with hot knives. He tightened his grip.

"Stop him!" gasped Wulfgar. "By all the drunken gods, stop him!"

Skari, who had been lying on the ground half-dazed, now crawled back into view. His face was bloody, one eye half-swollen shut, but the skinny bastard was alive. He saw the scene, understood in an instant what had happened, and did the only thing that made sense: He leaped forward and grabbed Grendel's hand, clutching two fingers as if they were his own.

Four human bodies clinging to the arm of a monster.

Grendel raged. His left hand flailed wildly, searching for any target to end this disgusting, unfamiliar situation. Air was ripped apart, wood splintered. A bench flew across the room, crashed against the hearth, sparks flew high. A stone from the hearth hole came loose and rolled across the floor.

The monster's foot stepped, searching for purchase, slipping in a mixture of blood, mucus, and mead. The whole body swayed, not much, but enough to set another injury in motion: the spear in its flank tore further, the wound gaped, and a new gush of this black fluid spilled onto the ground.

The stench was almost unbearable. A Dane in the background suddenly knelt down and vomited; he couldn't help himself. Another man prayed aloud, oblivious to the fact that he was mixing up his words.

Beowulf panted, his arms burning. He knew this couldn't go on much longer. No one could hold an arm like that forever. But he didn't need forever. He only needed this bit of time, this narrow strip between "too late" and "just in time."

"Pull him!" he yelled. "Not away – downwards! Pull him out of his own shit!"

They moved. Not coordinated in a tactical sense, but with that brutal, raw unity of men who no longer have a plan, only one goal: that this thing, which has been consuming their nights for years, finally loses something it cannot find again.

Grendel's body tensed completely. You could see the tendons beneath the skin, long and tough, like old ropes that had seen far too many winters of snow and salt. The skin on his arm wrinkled, the transition to his shoulder bulged as if something was about to burst.

In this chaos, this tug-of-war, this stinking, screaming mayhem, something new happened: for the first time – very briefly – Beowulf saw something like fear in those yellow eyes. Not fear of the men. Fear of something else: of losing a part of himself.

"He notices," Skari gasped. "The bastard notices."

Grendel jerked his head back, thrusting it forward as if trying to ram someone. He struck a beam; the wood splintered, and dust and old cobwebs rained down. The hall responded with a deep, pained creak. Heorot knew pain, but not like this.

Beowulf felt his strength waning. His muscles trembled, his fingers yearned to open, his body sending out alarm signals to every fiber. He thought of Hrothgar's face, that weary, hollowed-out shape, of Wealththeow's cold hand, of the dead who had lain there before. And of himself—how he could have sunk at some port, in his own vomit, without anyone ever speaking his name again.

“Don’t let go,” he forced out, more to himself than to the others. “Whoever lets go drinks with the gods of cowards.”

Wulfgar laughed dryly, despite everything. "They certainly have the better mead," he croaked. "But I'm staying here."

Then came the noise.

It wasn't a loud, dramatic bang. No thunder, no explosion. It was a crack. A nasty, dry-yet-damp tearing, like when you yank a large, tough root out of the ground. Accompanied by the cracking of several bones at once, the splintering of something hard that had been too deeply embedded to ever be dislodged.

Grendel roared. This time it was different. Not just pain, not just anger. It was a sound imbued with loss. A severed piece of identity.

The arm gave way. Not a little. Completely.

Beowulf felt the weight in his hands suddenly become lighter—not because it had diminished, but because it was no longer attached to what it should have been attached to. He and the others stumbled backward, pulled by this sudden release, falling, rolling, tumbling over one another. Something heavy crashed to the ground beside them.

It was Grendel's arm.

There he lay, a severed, oversized, bone-and-flesh slime pole, dark goo spurting from its shoulder end. His fingers were still twitching, uncontrollably, as if they hadn't noticed that the rest of his body was farther away.

Grendel staggered backward. His body was suddenly asymmetrical, one side heavy, the other ripped open. His shoulder gaped, a terrible oval wound from which a black, viscous fluid gushed. He flailed wildly with his remaining hand, hitting nothing but air and wood.

The scream that now escaped him was no longer a roar. It was a single, drawn-out, ugly sound, so full of pain, loss, and horrified surprise that one could feel pity for a split second—if one didn't know what kind of ground one was standing on.

Beowulf coughed his way to his feet. His arms felt as if they were no longer his. His shoulder throbbed, his back burned. His face was covered in phlegm, blood, and dirt. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, looked at his arm, looked at his body, looked at the men.

Wulfgar lay beside the torn-off thing, staring at it as if he couldn't believe he'd been attached to it. "Holy shit," he whispered. "We actually did it."

Skari laughed hysterically, a short, shrill sound that seemed more like relief than humor. "We stole an arm from a nightmare," he gasped. "If someone had told me that, I would have spat in their face."

Grendel stumbled backward, one step, then another. His blood, or whatever it was, left a dark trail on the gym floor. He tossed his head from side to side, as if searching for a way out, something to hold onto, an explanation. There was none.

His gaze flickered over the severed arm. Something broke in his eyes. Briefly. Then he turned. Not majestic, not invincible. He stumbled, almost slipped in his own trail of slime, caught himself, and was suddenly just a half-mutilated shadow, staggering towards the door.

"He's running," whispered one of the Danes. "The cattle are running."

"He's not leaving because of us," growled Beowulf, stumbling after them, breathing heavily. "He's leaving because he still knows where his hole in the ground is."

He could have pursued him. Maybe. Another blow, another stab, another furious leap into his back. But his body was empty. And somewhere in his mind he knew it would take another morning to finish this.

Grendel threw himself through the open door, ignoring it. His body vanished into the night, a heavy, limping shadow leaving dark drops in its wake. Outside, he could still be heard for a while, tumbling over earth, stones, and roots, getting up again, moving on. Then it grew quieter.

The hall remained. Filled with smoke, blood, decay, screams still etched into the beams. But there was something new. Lying in the middle of the floor was the arm, this absurd, enormous thing that had just been part of a nightmare and was now simply a trophy. Proof that darkness could bleed.

Beowulf stood before it, unsteady. He looked like a man emerging from a brawl in a dockside tavern, except that the tavern was a royal residence and his opponent wasn't a hungover sailor. His chest rose and fell heavily. There was a burning sensation in his eyes that neither mead nor pain alone could explain.

"Tie him up," he gasped. "Hang him from the beam. He should stay here where he belongs. As a reminder. For him. And for us."

Wulfgar laughed hoarsely. "You're telling me to lift this piece of shit?"

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “You and all those who still have arms that can do more than tremble.”

They approached the arm, one after the other. Some hesitated, some grabbed it as if taking revenge on a bad dream. The thing was heavy, disgusting, slippery. But they lifted it, little by little, with curses, with irritated laughter, with gritted teeth, until the first ropes were around it, until a beam was chosen that had already borne other burdens.

When Grendel's arm finally hung above them, dripping, fleshy, unbelievably real, something in Heorot was different. The smoke was the same, the dirt, the pools of blood, the dead on the edge. But there was a different note in the air.

Not victory. Victory was a word for bards and kings. It was more like finally delivering a punchline to a long, dark joke. It wasn't beautiful, not cathartic, not triumphant. It was just harsh, brutal, and true.

Beowulf stood beneath it, wiping his face, feeling every fiber of his being scream. He knew Grendel wasn't dead. Not yet. The monster would stagger bleeding through the swamp, bewildered, mutilated, filled with new hatred.

But something had been broken that night, something that no one had touched for a long time.

"That was just the beginning," he muttered, more to himself than to the others. "We've only shown him that the door can slam shut from the inside, too."

Outside, somewhere deep in the darkness, something howled. Perhaps it was Grendel. Perhaps it was just the wind, having found a new melody.

Inside, beneath the dripping arm, Heorot was breathing. Heavy. Dirty. But alive.

CHAPTER 7 – Bone Music in the Ballroom

When Grendel's roar finally faded into the swamp, something even louder remained: the silence that followed. Not a heroic silence, not a sacred one—more like the smoky silence of a tavern after a brawl, when everyone still standing is trying to pretend they have a plan. Heorot stood there like a boxer after the twelfth round: broken nose, loose teeth, but still on his feet.

The arm hung high above them, suspended by rough ropes, an oversized, repulsive corpse part that dripped like a blasphemous flag. Black phlegm dripped onto the floor, thick as guilt. With each drop, a soft splash mingled with the other sounds: the groans of the wounded, the gasps of the men, the creaking of wood weary of being the scene of the action.

Wulfgar stood with his hands on his knees, laughing hoarsely. It wasn't a happy laugh, more like the sound your body makes when it can't decide whether to vomit or cry. "We ripped his damn hand off," he gasped. "I swear, I had a bad dream, but something like this... nothing like this."

Skari crouched beside him, one eye half-swollen shut, his lip split. He looked up and grimaced. "If I keep staring up there, I'll dream about that thing for the next ten years. And not in a good way."

“There’s no good way to dream about an arm like that,” Bragi murmured, leaning against an overturned table. His spear-arm was still trembling, as if it had hooked itself onto something bigger than himself.

Beowulf stood at the center of this chaos, his back bloody, his shoulder ripped open, his hands so sore as if he had been working on stone walls with his bare fists. Sweat and phlegm clung to his skin, his shirt was nothing but a rag hanging on by a thread, having forgotten to fall apart. He looked like someone who had tumbled through all the levels of hell and been spat out at the top without anyone explaining why.

He turned his head slowly, as if his neck were also injured. His gaze swept over the dead on the ground: young Geate, whose first real battle had also been his last; the Dane, who had only stayed because he was too old to run; another, whom no one named at that moment, because names are difficult when the blood is still warm.

“Count them,” Beowulf managed to say, his voice rough as sandpaper. “All of them. Ours and theirs. I want to know what this damn night has cost.”

One of the Danes, who still half-believed in the old rituals, frowned. "That's a matter for the king," he muttered.

“The king isn’t sleeping here in the dirt,” Beowulf replied. “I am. So that counts.”

They moved, hesitantly at first, then with that grim routine men acquire after counting too many times what remains of the evening. Every body was turned over, every breath checked, every glance scrutinized on that thin line between "still here" and "already gone." The bones cracked when moved—shoulders, fingers, broken ribs. It was a kind of music unto itself, a crunching, dry melody of joints and splinters. Bone music, Beowulf thought. Herot is playing on himself now.

The skald stood up, his knees buckling briefly before regaining their balance. He didn't go to the dead; he went to the living. He stroked some over the shoulder, murmuring something that was half comfort, half curse. When he reached the severed arm, he stopped, placed his hand on the cold, slimy forearm as if it were a malevolent instrument.

"This will be an ugly song," he said quietly.

"Then it's appropriate for the night," Wulfgar growled.

The beast's head wasn't here, nor were its legs; its mutilated body was dragging itself somewhere out there through the bog. But this arm was enough to straighten out reality: it wasn't a dream, not a collective drunkenness, not an exaggerated story. Something that shouldn't have existed was hanging there, dripping at their feet as if the world had decided to become a matter of fact.

The bones of the dead clacked softly as they were moved. An arm that hung from an odd angle, a leg that creaked when straightened, a neck that could no longer be turned because whatever had moved it was gone. This quiet orchestra of remains mingled with the sounds of the living: the sharp inhalations as a wound was pinched, a cut roughly bandaged, a shoulder realigned.

"Sit down," Skari said to Beowulf at one point. "You look like you're about to fall over. That would be bad for our mood."

“We need one that doesn’t fall,” Bragi added. “Otherwise, tomorrow all that’s left in the center of the hall will be this arm. And I’m not about to be led by a detached monster piece.”

Beowulf sank down onto the bench. Not elegantly, more like a sack that had finally realized it could be put down. The wound in his shoulder throbbed in time with his heartbeat, his fingers cramped. He felt every tendon, every muscle, as if he had just been dressed in his body and forgotten to break it in.

A Dane came with a rag and tried to clean the mucus and blood from Beowulf's face. The cloth scratched and burned in the scrapes and cuts. Beowulf flinched, but he didn't snatch the rag from the man's hand. He let himself be wiped like a child too proud to admit he was tired.

"Hrothgar must see it," said one of the old warriors who had been standing at the edge. His voice was thin, but it held an old, angry glee. "He must see that the thing can bleed. Otherwise, he'll think this was all just a dream."

“He’ll see,” Beowulf murmured. “Tomorrow. He should sleep today if he can. It’s the first time in a long time that the hall contains more monster flesh than living men.”

They finished counting. Three Geaten dead. Five Danes. A few more on the brink, with broken bones, cracked skulls, open wounds you could have plunged your hand into, if you were so inclined. On a normal night, this would have been a disaster, a catastrophe that would have been the talk of three kingdoms. Tonight, it felt like a bargain.

"Grendel has had worse evenings," Wulfgar remarked drily. "If he still had a hand, he'd certainly be annoyed."

Beowulf took the hip flask that had somehow remained attached to his belt throughout the entire fight, as if it were the true talisman. He unscrewed it, drank, and this time the liquor burned through the pain, not the cold.

“We are alive,” he said. “That’s all. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

The skald sat down near the hearth, which now glowed only as embers. He took the harp, but he didn't play. He simply sat there, his fingers on the strings, and listened to the sounds of the hall: bones, footsteps, whispered curses, the ragged breathing of those who had realized how close they had just come to understanding nothing at all.

It was as if he were collecting these sounds, one by one, to later translate them into musical notes. Bone music. The hall was full of musical notes; one just had to pick them up.

Sometime later, as the first gray breath of dawn crept through the cracks in the walls, footsteps could be heard outside. Different footsteps. Lighter, hesitant. The door, still half off its hinges, was carefully pushed open. Men poked their heads in, women behind them, children behind them. Heorot had his audience back.

Hrothgar entered like a man unsure whether he was walking into his own house or his own grave. Wealhtheow was at his side, pale, her hair disheveled as if she had spent the entire night sitting beside a door that wasn't there. Her eyes immediately slid upward, to his arm, to the black rain of drops still falling to the floor.

The king stopped. His legs wanted to go further, but his face wouldn't. He looked at the arm, looked at the dead man, looked at Beowulf. In his eyes was something that looked as if it had once been called hope, before someone had buried it too deep.

“By all the gods I’ve forgotten,” he whispered. “You really did…” He didn’t finish the sentence. Words are like teeth; sometimes they fall out before you’re old enough.

Wealhtheow stepped forward. She saw first the wounds, then the eyes of the victims. She saw the severed arm, saw the suspension, saw the trail of blood leading to the door. And she understood. Not everything, not the details, not the sound the tear had made—but enough.

"The bones speak louder than you," she said softly. "You can hear that work has been done here."

Beowulf tried to stand up, succeeding on the second attempt. He suddenly seemed more sober, more alert, as if entering the throne had given him a fresh surge of adrenaline. He pushed himself up, looked at Hrothgar, and wiped the phlegm from his face a little too hastily, as if one could still make an impression on such a night.

"He's gone," he said. "Not dead. Not yet. But gone from your hall. He'll have to find a new place to spend his nights."

Hrothgar looked at him, for a long time, as if he had to see through layers of smoke, blood, and doubt to recognize him. Then he did something he hadn't done in years: he sank to his knees. Not cleanly, not respectfully—he simply collapsed, as if his legs had suddenly emptied.

"Get up," Beowulf growled. "I didn't do this so you could lie before me. I'm not a god, I'm just a poorly paid bastard who doesn't know when to stop."

"You have given us back the night," whispered Hrothgar. "For the first time since... I don't remember how long ago... the darkness will no longer automatically smell of him."

"She'll smell like him as long as that arm is hanging there," Skari interjected. "But maybe that's a good thing, for once."

Children stared upwards, some clinging to their mothers' skirts. A little boy began to cry, loudly, shrilly. A woman covered his eyes, but it was no use. Some men vomited again. Others laughed hysterically. Everything was in disarray, as always when reality suddenly becomes louder than the stories.

Amidst these sounds, the creaking of wood, the clinking of bowls, the rattling of bones, Beowulf stood and breathed. Each breath was a question his body asked: Was it worth it? And some stubborn part of him answered: Yes. For now.

The bone music in the ballroom continued to play. And it wouldn't stop anytime soon.

The morning that crept into the hall afterward wasn't a clean break between night and day. More like an afterglow of darkness in a watery gray. The smoke still hung under the ceiling, thinner than usual, but determined to stay. The torches were merely smoldering, the hearth fire had shrunk to a heap of aggressive embers.

Hrothgar was standing again—sort of. A few men had pulled him up, his knees protesting, but he refused to go back to the ground as long as so many others were already occupying it. He saw the dead, saw the maimed, and you could see something tighten in his back. The posture of a man who understood that the world still needed him, even though he hadn't signed a contract.

“We will bury them,” he said tersely. “All of them. With names. With faces. Not like those this creature has torn from our nights over the years. Those of whom only screams remain.”

"Funerals are for later," muttered Wulfgar, who was currently trying to bandage a makeshift wound on his forearm. "Right now, something to eat wouldn't be bad. And something to drink. Plenty to drink."

Hrothgar heard him, and it was palpable. The king looked at the queen, and between them flowed that swift, silent understanding once more. Wealththeow nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Mead,” she said calmly, her voice carrying farther than most of the night’s screams. “Bread. Meat. Anything that isn’t spoiled. Bring it here. This hall has drunk blood, now let it see that there is something else.”

It was a strange chain of commands. But it made sense, in its own twisted way: if death was at your door, you had to clear the table, otherwise it would take up too much space in your mind. So servants, women, a few boys ran off. Barrels were wheeled over, loaves of bread that had been set aside for quieter days were broken open, meat was cut up.

The skald sat closer to the center. His eyes were red, his fingers trembled, but he re-stretched the harp, pulled on the strings, tuned them to the noise of the hall. They sounded different, deeper, rougher. As if overnight not only the hall, but also his instrument had aged.

Unferth appeared, later than the others. He had survived the night, it was obvious, but he looked as if he wasn't entirely satisfied. His eyes were red, not just from the smoke, his gait unsteady, as if he'd drunk mead until his body shut down. Perhaps he had. Perhaps he'd sat in a side room, waiting for the screaming, hoping the strangers would finish it off and all he'd have to do in the morning is judge.

His gaze lingered on his arm, and for the first time since Beowulf had seen him, there was no mockery in it. Only pure, sharp terror and something that looked like wounded pride. Someone had hurt his monster. Not him.

He slowly approached, stopping next to Beowulf, who had sat down again because his body had finally decided that standing was a luxury.

"So," Unferth said quietly, without his usual venom. "You've really... done it."

Beowulf turned his head and looked at him sideways. "No," he answered. "We did it. We did it. I, Wulfgar, Skari, Bragi, those Danes over there. We all pulled on that arm together like a damned slot machine. And this time something fell out."

Unferth snorted. "You can't even keep your mouth shut when you're in victory."

“When I keep my mouth shut, others start talking,” said Beowulf. “And then they tell stories that make themselves look better. I’m tired of that.”

Unferth's gaze drifted to his own hands. They were clean. Too clean. Not a scratch from the night. He looked like someone helping to clean up after the others had done the work. And he knew it.

"They'll write songs about it," he said, as if trying to comfort himself. "About you. About that arm. About that night."

"Leave them be," murmured Beowulf. "Songs are like mead. At first they warm you, at last they make you stupid. I just want no one to forget how it stank. And how loud the bones were."

The skald seemed to have heard this. He began to open the harp with a dull thud—no delicate introduction, no beautiful plucking. The first note was a hard, deep strike that vibrated through the benches. Then more followed, a rhythmic, rough playing that sounded more like a march than a ballad.

He sang of the night, but not as kings liked it. He sang of men who had vomited, of fractures, of cold sweat, of screams that suddenly stopped. He sang of the sound of an arm being torn off, of that disgusting, dry rip that no one ever wanted to hear again, yet would never forget.

Hrothgar listened, pale but with open eyes. He was old enough to know that sometimes the truth could be better concealed in a song than in a report. Wealththeow stood beside him, cup in hand, passing it around. She let the Geaten drink first, then the Danes. She made Unferth wait until the very end, as if testing whether his pride could bear it.

Wulfgar listened to the song and snorted. "Sounds better than it felt," he muttered.

"Wait until he sings over your face," said Skari. "Then it'll be right again."

Mead flowed. Not as excessively as on other evenings, but enough to steady their hands. Bread was broken, meat was shoved into mouths with bloody fingers. Some men ate like wolves, others could barely swallow a bite.

Beowulf drank slowly. Each sip briefly pushed the pain to the side, but it always returned, like a dog unsure when to leave. His shoulder burned, his back felt as if someone had written on it with a knife.

Hrothgar finally got up from his seat, came to Beowulf, and didn't sit down—he stood, because he knew he wouldn't be able to get up otherwise. In his hand he held something shiny.

“You gave me back my hall,” he said, his voice clearer than the night before. “Not clean, not whole, but alive. I can’t bring back all the dead, I can’t undo all the nights that this thing took us like cattle. But I can thank the man who finally made it bleed.”

He held out his hand. In it lay a heavy gold bracelet, its edge dented, old. Not a new piece, but rather something that had seen other arms, perhaps even arms that were no longer there. "This belonged to my father," Hrothgar said. "I never liked wearing it. It felt like a reminder that I hadn't become like him. Perhaps it would suit you better."

Beowulf looked at the gold. It sparkled in the torchlight, as if proud to still shine. He took it, turned it briefly, then slid it across his forearm, where the skin was still intact. The metal was cold, heavy, and comforting.

“I’ll take it,” he said. “Not because I’m a hero. But because I know what it’s like to get rid of something that reminds you of old mistakes.”

Hrothgar nodded. "You will receive more," he added. "Rings, weapons, animals. Anything left that isn't already carried within by this monster. But this is what I wanted to give you first. So that you have something to remind you of where you don't want to return."

“Believe me,” murmured Beowulf, “I don’t need gold to remember this night.”

The skald raised his voice, now singing of the king who gave the stranger gold, of the bracelet, of the blood that dripped onto the ground while the gold shimmered. It was almost comical: between the verses about the severed arm, he slipped in this glittering little story, as if to say: Look, not everything is filth.

Unferth listened, his jaws clenched tightly. The words about Beowulf stung him like small, precisely placed knives. He didn't see himself in the song. No verse for the man who was skeptical, who needled, who remained in the shadows on the decisive night. The bone music played, but his own name was missing.

"They're already singing about you before the mead's even warmed up," he muttered later, as he passed Beowulf. "Be careful not to get tangled up in your own verses."

“I’m more likely to trip over my own feet than over songs,” Beowulf replied. “Don’t worry about it.”

The hall grew louder. Voices rose, men began to shout at the appropriate parts of the song, some clinked cups together, others raised them towards the hanging arm as if toasting it. Heorot was once again what it did best: a mixture of grave, tavern, and bad theater.

The bones of the dead were carried out one by one, as far as their strength allowed. Graves would be dug outside later, when their hands no longer trembled. The dead didn't fit into this new music, not into this mixture of pain, pride, and rough laughter. They had to go so that inside they could pretend they had won.

Beowulf watched them go. Each body carried past him was a silent question: Was it worth it? He had no answer. Only an arm above him, dripping, and a bandage on his forearm, pressing hard.

The bone-crunching music in the ballroom slowly changed rhythm. Less cracking, more clanging. Less groaning, more laughter. But beneath it all lay that quiet, persistent crunching: the reminder of how easily bones break. And that no one yet knew if this night was truly the end—or merely the end of the beginning.

Later, when the day had truly arrived and the sun managed to send a narrow, offended strip of light through the soot-covered windows, Heorot had this strange dual form: half funeral, half victory celebration, with a touch of madhouse.

Outside they were shoveling. Men with bent backs, boys with sore hands, a few women who could no longer cry because it had all been exhumed. The shovels smashed into frozen earth, into muddy patches, into roots that resisted. Each blow into the ground sounded a bit like striking an empty coffin.

Drinking was going on inside. Of course. What else is there to do when you've just ripped the arm off a nightmare? Beowulf stayed in the hall because he was too battered to shovel and too proud to retreat to a quiet chamber. His place was where the noises he'd helped make were.

The arm still hung above them, a grotesque decoration that no one would have called that because no one would have known the word. But that's what it was: a piece of inner life turned outwards, like a joke that had gone too far.

The flies had already spotted him, faster than any messenger. A faint humming had joined it, barely audible in the noise, but there nonetheless. Life wasted no time. It crept into every wound, into every possibility.

"He already stinks worse than Wulfgar after three days of drinking in the harbor," muttered Skari, who was sitting with half a rag over his face.

"Shut your mouth," Wulfgar replied. "At least I stink by choice."

Beowulf heard her, but he was preoccupied with his own body. Every movement hurt. The wound on his shoulder was roughly bandaged; someone had smeared it with an ointment that smelled of herbs and bad dreams. He could raise his right arm, but only to the point where the pain ripped through him like a red-hot blade.

This was nothing new to him. He had woken up like this more than once: in some strange room, broken, cut up, alive. The only difference was that this time there was a king nearby who wanted to cling to him.

Hrothgar was no longer the broken man he had been the night before. He was still tired, still old, still weary of life—but now he had something to point to when his people started babbling about gods, fate, and bad luck again. An arm. Proof.

He often just stood there, staring up at the thing. Sometimes he seemed to smile, a thin, ugly smile that didn't suit his face. Sometimes his gaze was just blank, as if he were trying to erase the years before with this image. It didn't work. That's not how memory works. But you can try.

Wealththeow was the one who held the hall together. She went from man to man, handing out cups, bread, brief touches. She didn't speak many words, no "thank you" and no "honor." She asked if anyone could still breathe, if they could eat, if they needed to sleep. She was the one who ensured that the thumping, skeletal music didn't descend into pure cacophony.

When she arrived at Beowulf's, she sat down opposite him. Not next to him – across from him. A small distance, but important.

"You look worse than you'd probably admit," she said.

“I look better than I feel,” he replied. “So everything is in balance.”

She studied him, the wounds, the eyes, the slight tremor in his hands. "You know this isn't over," she said. "You know that things that hold so much hatred don't just die simply because you tear something away from them."

"I know," he muttered. "But for today, it's enough for me that something out there is limping and screaming, instead of sitting in here nibbling at our people."

She looked at her arm. A drop broke free, falling into a bowl someone had placed there to catch the broth. It hissed slightly, as if it were fighting back.

“The men are already talking,” Wealtheow said. “Some say you were sent by a god. Others say you are one yourself. Still others think you are just a lucky madman.”

"The last one won," said Beowulf. "But don't tell them that. They'd rather drink to gods than to madmen."

She smiled faintly. "The songs will make you seem bigger than you are," she warned. "The men here need a name to cling to when they don't believe in themselves. You will be that name. Today. Tomorrow. Until they forget what fear means. And then the next monster will come."

"Then we hope that another idiot will get up by then," he said. "I won't be playing the role of an arm-puller forever."

Wealththeow was silent for a moment, looking into the cup she held. "My brother," she said suddenly, "used to call the hall 'our castle against the Nothing.' He believed these walls were more than wood. That they were a promise. Then Grendel came. The Nothing suddenly had teeth."

"And now it has one less arm," said Beowulf. "Not a promise, but a start."

She nodded slowly. "Perhaps we can tell again that this hall offers protection," she murmured. "Even though we both know it's a lie. Sometimes you need lies to move forward."

He looked at her. "What are you telling yourself?"

“That you will win tonight when he returns,” she replied calmly. “And that there is no mother who wants to avenge her son.”

There it was, the word that no one had spoken until now, but which hung in the air like smoke: Mother.

Beowulf looked at the arm as if he could read from those cramped fingers whether they belonged to a loner or a child. He didn't know. But he knew the world well enough to know that things rarely come alone.

Skari had grabbed some bones nearby. Not from the dead—from the food. Beef bones, pig bones, cleaned of their remaining flesh. He threw them on the table, letting them clatter, just like they used to do at night when they tried to read the future from them.

"And?" asked Wulfgar, who had half lain down on a bench. "What do they say?"

Skari examined the arrangement. One bone lay across, two parallel, one alone off to the side. He frowned. "They say," he murmured, "that everyone will pretend today that it's all over. And that it will sound different again tomorrow morning."

"They always say that," Wulfgar growled. "The bones are boring."

“The bones are honest,” the skald interjected from his seat. “It is you who invent the stories to go with them, so that you can swallow them more easily.”

He began a new song, quieter this time. Not a grand ballad, more a series of images: an arm in the smoke, men with bloody hands, children learning too early what fear smells like. The harp now sounded almost like a skeleton being run over with a stick – dry, creaking, harsh.

Beowulf listened and thought that he would carry that sound within him longer than any gold they could ever give him. The sound of wood yielding, of bones breaking, of an arm tearing from a body that thought itself indestructible.

Outside, they carried the dead to the pits. Inside, the hall held the arm. Different forms of memory, both heavy, both silent.

Towards evening—yes, the day really had been that short—the mood shifted. Pain can't be endured so directly forever, so they began to drown it. More mead, more meat, louder voices. Someone started making jokes about Grendel's missing hand: Imagine him sitting in the swamp, trying to hold a jug and spilling everything. They laughed, too loudly, for too long.

Beowulf drank along, but he didn't go as deep as the others. His head was filled with the sound of the crack, his body with the echo of Grendel's scream. He sensed that this was the moment when stories were born: drunken men, a mutilated monster, a hero with a bloody shoulder. A perfect cocktail for lies that last a long time.

“Today you will become a myth,” said Skari, growing paler as his cup filled. “Tomorrow you will wake up and find that you are only half of it.”

"The main thing is that I wake up," murmured Beowulf.

The bone-like music in the ballroom continued to play. Outside, the wind tapped against the walls, cautiously, as if to see if the hall still breathed. It did breathe. Heavy, rough, but it breathed.

And somewhere behind all the noise, behind the laughter, behind the songs and the clanging, lay the next shadow. The nasty suspicion that a mutilated beast is rarely the last in its family.

But for this day, Heorot was full: of mead, of blood, of misplaced pride – and of an arm that hung over them like a tough, dripping baton. The bone music had acquired a new instrument.

And Beowulf, sitting in the middle of this orchestra, sensed that this was the moment when he would do what men have done since the beginning of time when they have narrowly escaped death: he would get senselessly drunk.

The banquet hall was ready. The cups, too. And the night would come, this time without Grendel, but not without ghosts.

CHAPTER 8 – An arm as a trophy, a hero in a frenzy

The second evening began even though the first hadn't ended. That was the trick with days after nights like that: they pretended to be new, but in truth, they were merely an extension of something no one had properly processed. The smoke still hung in Heorot, the arm still brazenly over them, like a joke that had gone too far, and everyone acted as if it were time to party because no one knew what else to do.

Beowulf sat at the long table, in a place that wasn't his, but to which no one laid claim. His shoulder throbbed, his back felt as if someone had danced across it in iron boots, and his fingers were sore from holding on, from work, from that crazy moment when his arm had given way. He drank anyway. Not slowly, like a man trying to survive the evening, but in that tenacious rhythm that says: Screw it.

The mead was strong, stronger than the stuff in his harbor back home. It burned through his throat and chest, settling over the pain like a dirty cloak. Not enough to make it disappear, but enough to dull it. Dullness was the best the day had to offer.

Before him were piles of bowls piled high with meat, bread, cheese—everything they had dragged from the pantries to make the evening seem like a cause for celebration. The Danes stuffed themselves, laughed too loudly, and shouted stories to each other that grew longer as they were being told. Three men had stabbed Grendel in the leg at once, five had held him down, and one had spat in his face. Half of it was a lie, the other half was half a lie.

Wulfgar was already deeply drunk. He sat slumped on the bench, his shirt open, his hair plastered to his face. His hands were bound, his ankles blue beneath the bandages. He held his cup like an enemy he intended to slowly drown. "I'm telling you," he slurred to the group, "when I was hanging from that damned arm, for a moment I thought I was back in Raskir's tavern, when we ripped that swine of a barkeeper's door off its hinges. Only this time the door didn't roar."

Some men laughed, others didn't. Skari grinned over his mug. He had a crooked bandage over his eye and looked like someone who'd stolen Death's wallet and was hoping no one would notice. "If you'd clung to that monster's arm a little longer," he said, "your shoulder would have stayed in the swamp for good. Then at least you would have finally had an excuse for why you always spill everything when you drink."

Beowulf listened to them, letting the chatter wash over him like the sea. It was the usual post-mortem drama: men had to talk, otherwise what they had seen would remain too overwhelming. If you didn't talk about it, you'd start waking up at night seeing things that weren't there. So they downplayed it, made jokes, told themselves they had it all under control.

The hall was filled with noise. Hrothgar had ordered everything to be served that hadn't already been claimed by rats or mold. He wanted to crush the silence before it crept up on him again. The king sat atop the high seat, goblet in hand, looking like someone who still couldn't quite grasp that the arm up there was real. His gaze kept drifting upwards, lingering, returning to the men, then looking up again. As if with every sip of mead he wasn't sure if he was hallucinating.

Wealththeow moved between the rows of seats, refilling drinks, distributing bread, casting the kind of glances with which women have always assessed the damage. She saw the wounded, those who laughed too loudly, those who fell too silent. She was the only one who didn't pretend the nightmare was over.

The bards—there were more than one, if you counted all the half-talented babblers—were in high spirits today. The old skald with the leathery face dominated, but a few younger ones tried to wrest verses from him. They sang of Beowulf, of course. How he had fought Grendel naked, the first verses recounted. How he had ripped the monster's heart from its chest, the others howled. How he had laughed as its arm fell off.

“That’s how it goes,” Skari muttered, turning to Beowulf with the cup in his hand. “In the end, you were probably alone in the hall, the rest were playing cards in the stable. In two days we were all watching, in three you killed Grendel with a single look.”

“As long as they don’t start singing, ‘I would have whispered him to death tenderly in his sleep,’ I can live with it,” said Beowulf, taking another sip.

The mead settled warmly within him. He noticed his thoughts softening, becoming less sharp. Images surfaced, jumbled together: the moment his arm snapped; Grendel's grimace close to his face; Hrothgar's knee on the planks at the first sight of the trophy; Wealththeow's hand offering him her brother's knife; some dockworker from years ago who had called him "unnecessary" before ending up with him in the hayloft. Everything was a jumble, a foul soup of memories.

Unferth was there too, but he kept to himself. He drank, yes, and sometimes he laughed along, but it was a harsh laugh that didn't reach his eyes. He leaned against a post near the hearth, always finding the perfect angle where the fewest people were looking at him. His hands were still too clean.

Once the first wave of mead had passed through the men, once their appetites had subsided and their voices were still undecided whether to rise or fall, Hrothgar once again took center stage. Someone tapped a knife against a cup, the noise died down, and the hall took a deep breath.

“Men of Denmark,” the king began. His voice wasn’t very loud, but it carried far enough. “And men of the Geaten. This hall here…” He glanced around briefly, as if checking to see if it still belonged to him. “…it has drunk too much blood. Too often in the mornings we have heard only the voices of women calling out the names of those who could no longer answer. Today we hang here the arm of the one who did this to us. This is not making amends. This is not forgetting. But it is something.”

He raised his cup. “To the man who tore it off him,” he said. “To Beowulf, who came like a stranger and has now lost more blood in this hall than many who were born here.”

All eyes were on Beowulf, as if they were swords. He didn't like that. He drank, yes, he let the wave of mead wash over him, but those stares, that "You are our hero now," was something that weighed heavier on him than the arm against the ceiling.

Wulfgar nudged him with his elbow. "Get up," he whispered. "At least pretend you're enjoying it before they drown you in poetry."

Beowulf stood up. His knees felt like wood that had weathered a few winters. He hadn't prepared a speech—men like him don't prepare; they stumble through things and try not to break everything on landing. So he simply said what first came to mind.

“I ripped the beast’s arm off,” he began, and some were already laughing, because they liked the simplicity of it. “But it wasn’t just my hand on it. It was his too…” He pointed at Wulfgar, Skari, Bragi, at the Danes who had been hanging on with him. “Without them, I would have just been an idiot pulling on a bone that was too big.”

A few shouted in agreement, a few were surprised that he shared the fame.

“I did nothing for your gods,” he continued. “I did it because I can’t stand it when a house is afraid of its own door at night. A house is for drinking, fighting, and fucking. Not for waiting for something to come in and eat people. If you out there think I’m a hero now, fine by me. Tomorrow morning, when the mead’s gone and my head’s pounding, I’ll still be the same guy who stinks of cheap booze in the morning.”

Laughter, cruder now, more honest.

"So drink," said Beowulf. "Drink to your dead, to your living, to that damned arm up there. And if you're going to tell stories, at least leave a little pain in them. Otherwise, someone might think they can do the same thing, only with less fear. And they'll die in the first minute."

He sat down again. A few men clapped their hands on the table, some called his name, others simply clinked their cups. The skald nodded to him as if he had just been given a usable verse.

Mead flowed. Again and again. The voices grew louder, the jokes harsher, the lies bigger. At one point, they sang of a battle in which Beowulf had supposedly dragged Grendel by his hair across the hall before biting off his arm.

Skari leaned towards him and whispered: "If they continue like this, you'll end up having to pluck the moon from the sky with your own hand and give it to the queen."

"I hope I was drunk," Beowulf muttered. "I would never do something like that sober."

The intoxication crept into him like a second, warm animal. He noticed his body growing heavier, the outlines of people blurring, the arm hanging from the ceiling sometimes seeming to move, even though it was just hanging there. Once he swore he'd seen a fingertip twitch. He blinked, looked more closely, saw nothing.

“You’re staring at him like an old lover,” said Wulfgar. “Forget about it. It’s just meat. Like everything else.”

“Exactly,” said Beowulf, but deep down he knew that wasn’t true. Some things stick in your memory like old blood under your fingernails. You can scrub all you want—the dirt stays in your head.

Later, when the mead was almost gone and the songs were only half-sung because tongues couldn't keep up, Beowulf leaned back and let his head fall against the post. The sounds faded away, becoming a dull background hum.

For a moment, it was as if he were sitting in a different hall again, years ago, with other men who now lay buried somewhere. The same faces in different variations: proud idiots, frightened idiots, drunken idiots. And somewhere in between, himself, trying to bargain with death as if it were a merchant in a marketplace.

He closed his eyes. Just for a moment, he told himself. Just a blink, to disappear for a little while, to come back before the night comes up with something new.

The mead held him captive. And before he could think of the next sentence in the conversation, the next sip, the next glance at his arm, he was gone. Not dead, just gone. Gone into the intoxication.

The party continued in the hall. Blood dripped from his arm. And outside, deep in the moor, some blood trailed behind it, not forgetting where it came from.

The intoxication was not a friendly one. It didn't come like a warm blanket someone drapes over you in a half-asleep state. It came like a sack over your head, filled with filth. Beowulf didn't slip gently; he fell. The last thing he remembered was Wulfgar's laughter, the clinking of a goblet, and the skald's off-key singing. Then there was only darkness, reeking of mead and blood.

In the darkness, he was fighting again. Not in Heorot, not in the smoke, but somewhere between water and flesh. Grendel's arm wasn't just an arm; it was a tree, a root, a serpent. Every time Beowulf pulled at it, something pulled him back. He heard the tearing, again and again, only this time someone else was tearing. At him. Shoulder, ribs, throat. Voices screamed, some he recognized, some he didn't. A few sounded like old comrades, long dead. One sounded like his father, whom he had barely known. "Let go," the voice said. "You always cling to things that drag you down into the swamp."

Beowulf held on tight. Not because it made sense, but because he didn't know how to let go of something he'd grabbed. The arm wouldn't budge; instead, the whole creature fell on top of him. Weight, stench, teeth.

He woke up to find he couldn't breathe. Not because something was pressing on him, but because his own body had decided to take a short break. He gasped for air, opened his eyes wide, and the world came back to him like a bad joke.

The hall had grown darker. Someone had let most of the torches burn down; only the ones by the hunting stand still flickered wearily. Most of the men were lying around somewhere, half-naked, half-dressed, in poses no one would have wanted to imitate the next day. Everywhere there were overturned cups, smeared food, and smeared stains, not all from the mead. The smoke hung lower, thicker, a greasy film between it and the dangling arm.

His head throbbed. His skull felt as if someone had tried to pop it out from the inside. His tongue was dry as old felt, his throat burned, and his stomach was still undecided whether to hit his throat or his liver. His shoulder, which had already been aching, now had a pulse of its own, as if a second, malignant heart had been implanted beneath the bandage.

Beowulf slowly sat up. Every muscle protested, every bone creaked. He looked around. Wulfgar lay on his back, his mouth open, a thin thread of saliva dangling from his chin. One of the Danes hadn't made it to the corner and had vomited into his own cup, which now sat

like a sad little puddle beside his hand. Skari lay half-under a bench, his arm wrapped around a piece of bread as if afraid someone would steal it.

"Beautiful picture," Beowulf murmured. His voice was hoarse, more of a croak than a word.

His arm hung above him. He saw it more clearly now, more soberly, even though the word "soberly" in this state was an insult to any dictionary. The flesh had begun to change color. Less dark, more putrid. His fingers had become stiff, but the joints were still in that spasmodic half-grip, as if trying to grasp something that was no longer there.

The stench had intensified. Mead, blood, sweat – all of that was now overpowered by the sweet and sour note of incipient decay, mixed with peat and something reminiscent of stagnant water in which things had lain for too long that should never have been there.

Beowulf stared upwards for a while. The intoxication receded hesitantly, like a tide struggling for every puddle. In his mind, the images of the night replayed, this time more slowly, as if someone were going through a faulty film frame by frame. The first grab, the crushed Geate, the Dane who had flown against the post like a sack. The moment his hands seized Grendel's arm, the weight of the other men, Wulfgar, Bragi, Skari, hanging onto it. The tear. The scream. The arm.

Except that now things were surfacing in his memories that weren't quite right. He saw himself laughing as his arm jerked. He didn't remember laughing, but the memory showed it that way. He saw Grendel's eyes, and in them not just pain, but something that looked like… disappointment. As if someone had taken a toy away from him.

"Stop it," he said quietly to himself. "It's over. At least that much is."

Unferth's voice came from the darkness, closer than Beowulf had imagined. "Only the part everyone has seen is over," he said. "The rest is just beginning."

Beowulf turned his head. Unferth sat not far away on an overturned crate, his back against a post. He hadn't slept. His eyes were red, but not from alcohol. More likely from thoughts that had been too loud. His cup was still half full.

"You're the only idiot here who can still sit up straight," said Beowulf. "Congratulations."

"I experienced the monster sober," Unferth murmured. "I didn't want to let it into my head while drunk."

“Too late,” said Beowulf. “It’s already hanging up there. More in your head than on the beam.”

Unferth looked at the arm, then back at Beowulf. "How does it feel?" he asked. "When you do something like that?"

Beowulf thought for a moment. Not for long, he wasn't one for brooding, but he didn't want to come up with a cheap answer. "At first, it feels like you've given the gods a good thrashing," he said finally. "Like you've proven you're not just a piece of meat waiting for its end. And then you realize you've simply chosen a different end. One with more noise. That's all there is to it."

Unferth snorted. "You talk like someone who's afraid to be happy," he said.

“I’m afraid of the days that follow,” Beowulf replied. “Of the evenings, too. Of those faces…” He gestured vaguely around the hall, at the half-asleep, half-dead men. “…looking at you as if you were now responsible for their dreams.”

“You won’t be able to explain to them that you weren’t fighting for them,” Unferth said. “They want to believe you valued their lives more than your own. But you were just angry at the wrong door.”

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "You understand me better than I'd like to admit."

“That doesn’t make it any easier to like you,” Unferth said. He took a sip of his drink, barely flinching. “You know what’s really getting to me?” he continued. “That I was right and wrong at the same time. I thought you were a big mouth who’d fall flat on his face. Instead, you’re still standing, and there’s this thing hanging up there…” He trailed off, apparently unable to think of a single word that wasn’t too short to fit his arm.

“You were right about one thing,” said Beowulf. “I am a braggart. I have simply learned to do what I talk about later. That’s the whole trick.”

The two were silent for a while. The hall breathed heavily. A man snored loudly, turned over in his sleep, and muttered some woman's name. Another woke briefly, sat up, saw the arm, vomited into his own lap, and lay down again.

"What will you do when you leave again?" Unferth asked.

"Drink," Beowulf said automatically. "Fight. Sleep. Same as before."

"And what will that do to you?"

Beowulf shrugged, immediately regretting it because the pain had written a clear answer into his nerves. "Nothing that isn't already there," he muttered. "I was already sleeping badly. Now at least I know what I'm dreaming about."

Unferth looked at him for a long time. His gaze was a mixture of resentment, respect, envy, and relief. "I should hate you," he said. "You've done what we couldn't. You are the living proof of our failure."

"Then start small," said Beowulf. "Hate me a little and deal with it. You can sing my praises if it helps you. Or speak ill of me when I'm gone. This is your hall, not mine."

"I've already spoken badly about you," Unferth reminded him.

“Then it would be unusual if you stopped,” said Beowulf. “But perhaps you could add a few new sentences.”

The mead in Beowulf's blood began to work again. The sharpness of waking gave way to a softer weariness. His eyelids grew heavy, the room seemed to float a little. This time it wasn't a fall, more of a slow glide.

“Sleep,” Unferth said, as if he had found his role. “Tomorrow you’ll have to sit again while they all stare at you and call you what they would like to see themselves. Today you’re still the man who ripped the arm off a monster. Tomorrow you’ll already be a story.”

“Stories drink less,” Beowulf murmured as he lay back down. “That’s their fault.”

He closed his eyes. The arm still hung above him, just an irregular lump in the darkness. In his dream this time, he wasn't Grendel, not Beowulf, not a hero, not a monster. He was just a hand holding onto something, not knowing what would happen when it finally let go.

The hall around him slept in stages. Bit by bit. In this liminal world of pain, intoxication, and dull exhaustion, Heorot was free of monsters for a few hours. Only his mind was full of them.

If someone had stumbled through the wet ground outside, bleeding, maimed, half-mad with pain – no one would have heard it. The bone music had faded, but it was still playing. They had only changed the guitars: from crackling to a deep, slow thumping.

Beowulf fell asleep again, and the arm continued to drip.

The hangover the next day was a mixture of personal punishment and divine rebuke. It was as if the gods had sat around a table all night, drinking mead and debating how much headache to allot to each man in Herot. In Beowulf, they had been generous.

He came to a position half-sitting, half-kneeling, somewhere between the bench and the floor. His tongue was a piece of leather in his mouth, his lips chapped, his skull throbbing in time with his heartbeat. His shoulder immediately protested, a bright, pulsating burning that said: You did some stupid things yesterday.

The hall looked even worse in the daylight, as far as it filtered through cracks and soot-covered openings, than it had at night. Remnants lay everywhere: bones, breadcrumbs, spilled mead, a torn coat, a shoe whose owner snored barefoot beside it. Someone had vomited against a pillar, leaving a trail across the floor.

His arm was still hanging there. It hadn't improved. The skin had begun to take on a different, sickly gray. The mucus dripped more slowly, but more deliberately, as if it had chosen specific spots. Flies now landed on it like small, black thoughts.

Beowulf stood up because sitting wasn't an option once his thoughts started to wander. He swayed briefly, caught himself on a post that was used to him. A few men stirred, blinked, cursed, held their heads, and asked for water, mead, or mercy.

Wulfgar woke to a sound somewhere between a pig and a dying crow. "Who hit me in the skull?" he grumbled.

“You yourself,” said Skari, pushing himself out from under the bench. “Multiple times. With cups.”

“I’m too strong-willed for my own good,” Wulfgar muttered. “That’s the problem.”

Beowulf headed for the door. He needed air, anything that didn't smell of decay and spilled mead. His feet were stuck to the floor in places where blood and drink had formed a kind of

glue of their own. He stepped over it, through it, on it, without looking. If you looked at every spot in a hall like that, you'd never get anywhere.

It was cold outside. Not the pleasant kind of cold that wakes you up, but the kind that seeps through fabric and skin and says: You are not welcome here. The sky was an indifferent gray, the ground muddy, yesterday's pits freshly filled in. Hills of earth, too smooth, too tidy to be natural.

He paused for a moment, gazing at the graves. He recognized this type of landscape. Everywhere he had been, people had sooner or later piled up such mounds. They covered up their mistakes, their losses, their dead brothers. Then they would go to the nearest hall and tell everyone how wonderfully everything had gone.

"You look awful," said a voice behind him.

Wealhtheow stepped out of the shadows of the hall wall. She had slept, but not enough. The rims of her eyes were dark, her skin pale. She wore a coat that was better than the men's, but not warm enough against this kind of cold.

"I dressed up especially for this occasion," said Beowulf. "A hero in a hangover. It's a rare role."

She stepped beside him, following his gaze to the burial mounds. "They all talk as if this is the end," she said. "But we both know it isn't."

Beowulf nodded. "Grendel isn't dead," he murmured. "Only hurt. Angry. Hungry. And he knows now that there's someone in here who can hurt him. That's no invitation to peace."

"And you think he crawls into his hole and cries?" she asked.

“I believe that things which thrive on hatred do not exist in isolation,” said Beowulf. “I also believe that no one becomes that way without something having gone wrong first. And if he has a mother…”

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. Wealhtheow wasn't stupid.

“In the old stories,” she said, “monsters are always loners. Demons that come out of the darkness, without family, without origin, without connection. It’s more convenient that way. Then you don’t have to ask yourself where they come from. Then you can pretend they’re just… there.”

“In the world I live in,” said Beowulf, “every bastard has a mother and usually a father who was drunk when he was conceived. And nobody becomes a cannibal for fun.”

She looked at him for a long time. "You're smarter than you look," she said.

"That's not difficult," he said.

She laughed briefly, without joy. "What will you do when she comes?" she then asked. "The one who raised him. The one who misses him. The one who is now sitting somewhere in some dark corner and feels that a part of her is hanging in your hall."

Beowulf took a deep breath. The cold air bit into his lungs, almost feeling good. "Then I'll do what I can," he said. "That's always the answer. I can't do more. I can't do less."

"And what can you do?"

He looked at them, saw the graves, saw in his mind the arm under the blanket. "I can hold onto things until they break," he said. "I can put my body between others and what wants to devour them. I can drink until my head stops screaming. And I can gamble with death as if he were a bad card player. That's my repertoire."

"Maybe that will be enough one more time," she murmured. "Maybe not."

They walked silently side by side for a while, a few steps along the hall, along the wall where the shadows clung.

“The men are calling you my friend now,” she finally said. “Do you have many friends?”

"Friends are overrated," said Beowulf. "They just die and leave holes. I have companions. They die too, but it's better to sing about them."

"Is this just another entry on a list of things you've done to remind yourself that you're alive?"

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "If it helps you, you can call it that. For me, it's another night in which I haven't breathed in vain."

She stopped, looked at him once more, with that look that means everything and says nothing. "When you leave," she said, "they will talk about you for years to come. They will remember your words, your laughter, the arm you left them. But they will forget how tired you looked when you stood out here today. They always do."

“Let them,” he replied. “My problem is tiredness.”

He went back inside because there was no point in standing outside any longer staring at the graves. At least inside it was warm, loud, and dirty. Things he could handle.

Inside, the atmosphere had changed. The mead barrels were noticeably emptier, the voices deeper. Some men had started using Grendel's arm as a target for their jokes. One threw knuckles at it as if it were a game. Another tried to climb up to him to put a helmet on his head. He failed, fell on his back, lay there, and laughed.

"They haven't learned much about respect," Skari muttered.

"They were too afraid to know respect as anything other than gritting their teeth," said Wulfgar. "Now they're cocky. Give them two nights, and they'll be crying again at the slightest shadow."

Beowulf sat down, not as far forward as he had been the evening before. Further back, closer to the wall, where he could keep an eye on the people without being the center of attention himself. The skald was already at work again, crafting new verses, trying out rhymes for "arm," "harm," and "worm." Some worked, some didn't. He didn't care.

Unferth eventually stood up, came over, and held out a cup to Beowulf. "To the man I can't stand," he said. "And without whom I probably wouldn't be sitting here today."

Beowulf raised a toast. “To the man who talks too much when he’s sober,” he replied. “And who will one day write a song in which he lets himself out.”

They drank. The mead flowed into the same abyss into which the screams, the fear, the bone music had already fallen. The thing never filled up.

Towards evening—the day a mere shadow that had briefly passed over them—Beowulf was drunk again. Not as drunk as during the night, but enough to soften the edges of the world. His raised arm was now part of the furniture, perverse as that sounded. That's how quickly a person can become accustomed to anything that doesn't immediately tear their heart out.

He felt something settle inside him. Not the pain, not the fatigue. Something else. Something like: You delivered. For that moment, a debt had been paid. He could sit, drink, be silent, and no one could say he hadn't earned it.

That was the most dangerous part. Not the monster, not the fight, not the tear in the flesh. The danger was that feeling of having done something good and now being able to do anything. Men are destroyed by that long before anyone smashes their head in.

Beowulf took another sip. He knew he would stumble into the same drunken stupor as before. More dreams, more Grendel, more tearing sounds in his head. And yet he drank. Because there was nothing else available.

Above him, the arm dripped to the beat. Outside, the wind spit against the walls. Fresh mounds lay in the earth below. Somewhere further out, in a dark waterhole, perhaps in a cave, someone left a trail of black blood and swore that this wasn't over yet.

But in Heorot, at that moment, an arm was a trophy, and a tired bastard from Geatland a hero in a drunken stupor. And none of the drunken idiots raising their glasses suspected that the next night would cut deeper than the last.

For now, it was enough to turn up the bone music and kill the rest of the day with mead.

CHAPTER 9 – Herot cleanses away the blood

The morning after, the hall smelled as if someone had tried to dilute hell with water. It was that mixed stench only humans can create: blood, mead, vomit, cold ash, sweat – and on top of it all, the desperate attempt to pretend it was all just a fluke with freshly boiled water and a few herbs.

Beowulf was awakened by the sound of scrubbing. Not screams, not songs, not the muffled roar of a monster, but brushes on wood. A scraping, monotonously persistent sound, like teeth grinding on a grand scale. He opened his eyes and at first saw not faces, but feet. Many feet. Barefoot, in rough shoes, wrapped in cloth. They stood in puddles, stepped on wet rags, in buckets, in scraps.

He lifted his head. That was a mistake. His skull protested with a wave of pain that coursed through him so cleanly that for a moment he thought Grendel had actually ripped his head off and someone had put it back on incorrectly. His shoulder protested with its own, brighter burning sensation. The bandage had slipped, was soaked, and clung to his skin as if it wanted to become part of him.

The hall was brighter than yesterday, but not more welcoming. Daylight had a way of revealing everything the night had obscured. You could now see the streaks of blood that, despite scrubbing, still clung to the grooves in the floorboards. You could see the splashes on the beams that no one could remove because no one could reach that high. You could see the dark stains where Grendel's slime had seeped into the wood, making it look as if someone had buried the shadow itself.

Women walked hunched over, rags in hand, buckets beside them. Their faces were dull. Not cold, not hysterical—dull. The kind of face you get when you do things that need to be done, even though you can't bear to do them. Some muttered something, perhaps prayers, perhaps curses. Others were silent, except for that one sigh that sometimes escaped them when their backs protested.

Children ran around, smaller than the buckets they carried. Some carried water, others hauled away scraps of wood. One boy held a scrap of clothing, still stained with blood. He clutched it as if it were a treasure, until a woman snatched it from his fingers, snatching it away with a look that said: Not that. That's the one thing you're not collecting today.

The arm still hung over everything. Its stench had won. Even the hot water they poured on the floor couldn't dislodge it. It had taken on that sweetish undertone that only things half-dead, half-work in progress, possess. Flies buzzed around it, fat, contented creatures celebrating their own kind of feast.

Beowulf sat up, bracing himself with his good hand. One of the buckets stood dangerously close to his foot, a thin trickle of blood-thinned water lapping against his ankle. It was cold. He looked down, saw the red move in the water, still too pale to be old.

Skari emerged from the chaos, a rag slung over his shoulder and a bucket in his hand, which he was clearly only carrying to look like he was working. His eye was still half-closed, the bandage new but crooked.

“Good morning, you romantic nightmare,” he said. “Welcome to the part the singers later forget.”

Beowulf looked around. "You let men clean you?"

“They make us pretend to be cleaning,” Skari corrected. “The real work is done by those who aren’t important enough for stories. As always.”

Wulfgar sat on a stool that looked as if it might collapse beneath him at any moment. He held a broom in his hand, gripping it like a weapon, but leaning on it more than using it. His beard stood on end, and his eyes were small and red.

"I've fought against worse opponents than dirt," he growled. "But this one is tough."

“The dirt or your head?” Beowulf asked.

“Both.” Wulfgar listlessly swept a corner with his broom, a corner that held more shadow than dirt. “They call this a day of honor. Yesterday they cheered you on, today they’re wiping your work off the floor. Tomorrow the stories will start cleaning themselves up.”

Hrothgar stood at the front of the hall, no longer on the high seat. He was talking to a few old men who looked as if they belonged in a corner by the fire, blankets over their knees. Now they stood hunched over, simple brooms in their hands, as if they had forgotten they had once been warriors. The king spoke to them softly, seriously, with gestures that were more apology than command.

Wealththeow moved through the chaos like a commander. She ordered which blanket was hung out to dry, who should fetch more water, and which bucket went where. Her hair was pinned up, but a few strands had come loose and clung to the back of her neck, damp with steam.

She saw Beowulf, paused briefly, looked at him as if considering whether to yell at him or hit him with a cup. She chose the cup.

"Drink," she said, pressing something into his hand. It wasn't mead, but water, slightly warm, with a hint of something that smelled of herbs.

Beowulf took a sip. His body was surprised. Water the morning after so much mead felt like an unexpected apology. He drank more. It didn't exactly feel good, but it didn't hurt either.

"You can stay seated," Wealtheow said. "We have enough hands to carry the stains you caused."

“I can stand,” growled Beowulf, and slowly rose to his feet. He succeeded, but not elegantly.

“You can stand,” she confirmed. “But you can’t scrub properly.” Her gaze slid to his shoulder. “It’s enough for you to watch what’s happening here. So you know what the next fight will be like when you’re gone. This is what it looks like when you try to wash blood out of wood.”

He braced his good hand against the table and watched. Women rubbed until their hands turned red. Water turned pink, then dark, then it was poured out and fresh water fetched. Grooves in the wood remained dark, no matter how much they were rubbed. You could spread the stain, lighten it, but you couldn't erase it.

“The wood doesn’t forget,” said Skari, as if he had read my thoughts. “You can scrub as much as you like. In ten years, a young lad will be sitting here, leaning on the table, and suddenly he’ll smell something. He won’t know what it is. Only that he’ll feel sick. Those are the stories that aren’t sung.”

The skald sat in a corner, his feet drawn up, the harp beside him. He wasn't playing. His hands were empty, and that seemed almost more unnatural than anything else. He watched as they washed, pushed, and hauled. His gaze kept returning to the arm.

“Don’t you want to take him down soon?” Beowulf asked Wealtheow. “He’s starting to take over the hall.”

“Not yet,” she replied. “They need to see him for a while longer. Otherwise, they’ll start convincing themselves it didn’t really happen. And then it will all have been for nothing.”

"It will rot," said Skari. "The manure will eventually end up in our soup."

“Then we’ll make another batch of soup,” she replied. “We’ve swallowed worse.”

It was hard to tell whether she meant it metaphorically or not.

A young Dane—too young to remember his first nights with Grendel, old enough to suffer the consequences—kneeled in a pool of blood, scrubbing furiously. His hands were already swollen from the water, his fingers cracked at the knuckles. But he didn't stop. The spot beneath him was where young Geate had been struck against the post, the one whose name Beowulf had had to say three times that morning before he found him again.

"You will rub the board clean," said Beowulf.

The boy glanced up briefly. His eyes were large and red, as if he had lain awake all night, even though he had been drunk. "It has to go," he murmured. "It has to go. If it's gone, it can't come back."

Beowulf saw the stain. It had become lighter, yes. But there was still that faint shadow that wouldn't go away. "It won't go away," he said. "You can fade it, but you can't erase it."

"Then I'll scrub until you can't see it anymore," the boy said defiantly, bending down again.

"Leave him be," Wulfgar said quietly. "Everyone cleans up in their own way. He cleans the floor, you clean up your guilt, I clean up my skull."

Hrothgar approached, remaining within earshot, but said nothing for a while. He watched his men kneel, stand, stoop, and carry. His hands made small movements, as if they wanted to intervene, yet knew it was too late.

“I should have scrubbed earlier,” he finally said. Not aloud, not to anyone in particular. The sentence simply fell into the room.

Beowulf looked at him. "You did what you could," he said.

“That’s what they always say to kings who have failed,” Hrothgar replied. “But the truth is, we preferred drinking to looking. We celebrated this place while it was already beginning to rot from the inside. And then something from outside just finished it off.”

He looked at Beowulf. "You've gotten your hands dirty in our shit," he said. "Now we're trying to pretend we can take it off your hands."

Beowulf shrugged his good shoulder. "I have my own morgues in my head," he muttered. "Yours are just louder."

Wealhtheow grabbed a fresh cloth and threw it to Beowulf. "If you're so keen to help, do something useful," she said. "At least wipe your face. You look like a half-stabbed pig."

He laughed, a dry, scratchy sound, and wiped his face. Mucus, blood, dirt – it all stayed on, but it became more bearable.

The rest of the morning passed to the rhythm of buckets being filled and emptied, rags turning black and being wrung out again, voices rising and falling. Children stopped asking when they could play. Men stopped telling jokes. Women didn't stop working, because they never did.

Beowulf eventually returned to his seat, sat down, and watched the whole scene like someone sitting in front of a stage, watching a play in which he had a minor role. He was tired, but too excited to slump back down. The bone music had changed its instruments: less cracking, more scraping, more soft sighs, more drops of water and old blood.

Heorot cleaned up the blood. At least what was visible. Everything else remained where it always was: in the wood, in people's minds, in the ground outside, where fresh mounds told the story of what had truly happened.

Beowulf knew that this was only the surface. You can wash a hall clean. What grew within it remains. And somewhere outside, in some cold hole, someone else was washing the blood from their skin—and realizing they were missing an arm.

The hall was trying to clean itself. Night was already forging its mark on the next spot.

Around midday, the air in Heorot hung heavy with moisture, like damp fur. The water on the ground had receded, but the stench hadn't. It had merely transformed: less fresh, more stale, with a hint of herbal scent sprinkled on top, like cheap perfume over a latrine. You could smell the effort. You could also smell that it wasn't enough.

Beowulf had long since stopped counting the scrubbers' movements. It was always the same: put down a bucket, shove in a rag, wring it out, scrub, wipe, sigh. A little further, then start all over again. That was what heroism looked like the day after, when the bards had finally shut up.

Osric, the seer with the gaze that made him speak more to shadows than to people, reappeared when most thought they had successfully forgotten him. He suddenly stood in the doorway, thin as a withered twig, and inhaled the air as if checking whether the place was still the same.

"It reeks of work," he muttered. "And of an arm that doesn't belong here."

Wulfgar, who was pretending to sweep the corner – he'd been pushing the same pile of dirt around in circles for ten minutes – looked at him. "Don't you have any other halls you can grace with your muttering?"

Osric took a few steps in, cautiously, as if the floor might be biting. "Other halls still have their monsters in their heads," he said. "You hung yours from the ceiling. I wanted to see if it had already started talking to you."

"It doesn't talk," Wulfgar growled. "It only smells."

"Smell is a form of communication," Osric said. "Only more honest."

Beowulf watched him. The old man moved as if the room were full of invisible threads he didn't want to touch. He finally stopped under the arm and looked up, his neck creaking. Flies buzzed around him, briefly landing in his beard, then flew off again.

"It doesn't know it's dead yet," the seer murmured. "Its body is wandering somewhere, searching for something that's missing. The Halls are lucky that the swamp is vast. So vast that pain can dissipate within it."

Skari came by with a bucket and stopped because he knew that thin, old face sometimes saw things that others only felt and didn't want to admit. "You always hear what no one wants to hear," he said. "What are you hearing right now?"

Osric tilted his head as if listening. In the hall, one could hear scrubbing, puffing, the dripping of water, the soft slapping of rags being wrung out. And above it all, the buzzing of flies.

“I hear wood trying to forget,” he said finally. “And men telling themselves they can carry their guilt out in buckets. I hear women swearing that their children will be safe in this hall. And deep beneath it all, I hear something else.”

"What?" asked Wulfgar.

“Someone calling for his child,” Osric said softly. “Not with words. With everything he is.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop for the duration of a heartbeat. No one said anything, but everyone was thinking the same thing. It hung in the air like steam.

Beowulf approached slowly. "You're talking about Grendel," he said. "Or about what made him."

Osric looked at him, and in his eyes was a weariness older than this hall. "Every beast has a story," he said. "And every story has someone who started it. You've torn one of the tools from the end. The beginning won't find that funny."

"Can the beginning swim?" Skari asked dryly. "Because I swear on everything I don't care about – if something like that comes along, I'd rather choke myself."

Osric smiled crookedly, without joy. "You're laughing now," he said. "That's good. Laughter is armor. Thin, but armor nonetheless. You'll need it. Because something is moving out there in the bog. Slowly. Not like him. Not as big, not as heavy. But deeper."

Wulfgar waved the broom as if trying to banish the thought. "If something else comes along, then something else comes along," he growled. "Yesterday we stole the arm from a dream. Today we can still break a mother's heart."

Beowulf looked at him sharply. "You only talk like that because you survived yesterday," he said. "If you were the boy who lay there on that spot, you would speak differently."

Wulfgar glanced away briefly, towards the spot where young Geate had hit the post yesterday. The mark was still there, only lighter. The woman scrubbing it had tears on her face, mixing them with the water without realizing it.

“I know what it’s like to almost die,” Wulfgar muttered. “I had that beast’s breath on my face. If I hadn’t been there in time…” He broke off, snorting. “Screw it. I’m just talking like someone who has another day. That’s all there is to it.”

Osric sat down on a stool that looked as if it might collapse beneath him. It didn't. "You clean here," he said, "as if you could wipe last night from the face of the earth. But the world out there doesn't clean. It remembers everything. Every scream, every bone, every drop of blood. And the bog..." He closed his eyes briefly. "The bog is a good listener."

"The bog can go to hell," Skari muttered. "I'm fed up with some holes in the ground remembering our stories. Let them suffocate."

Beowulf had heard enough. Not because Osric was talking nonsense—the man was strange, but not stupid—but because his mind wasn't ready for prophecies. He was quite content with the things he could touch: arms, swords, cups. Words hanging in the air frightened him more than claws.

He went to the area where the hearth fire had burned yesterday. Now it was just a gray pile of ash and charred wood remnants, waiting to be rekindled. A boy stood nearby, holding a bundle of thin twigs and looking uncertain, as if he didn't know whether he was allowed to light a fire again in a hall where so much had been burned.

"Light the fire," said Beowulf. "Night is coming anyway. We don't need to freeze in broad daylight."

The boy nodded, knelt down, and awkwardly began to strike sparks. The first few disappeared into the gray dust of the ash. The second managed to catch a piece of dry grass that someone had placed there as tinder. A thin wisp of smoke rose.

Beowulf watched as the flames laboriously devoured the remains. It took a long time. Everything took a long time today. Even the fire had a hangover.

Hrothgar came closer, stopped beside him, looked at the embers, then at the dirty boards, then at the arm. "I'm too old for new stories," he said quietly. "But this one will outlive me."

"Most stories outlive those who lived them," said Beowulf. "Otherwise, the minstrels would have nothing to do."

"And you?" asked Hrothgar. "What will become of your story if you are no longer in it?"

Beowulf thought of his past nights, of other halls, other battles, other men who had celebrated him for being willing to go where they didn't want to go. "I'm not here to leave footprints," he said finally. "I'm here to make sure there are fewer screams left in the wood. If after that someone shouts my name while getting his sons drunk—fine. If not—fine too."

Hrothgar looked at him for a long time. "You talk like someone who knows that fame is a cheap bandage," he said. "I wish I had met you sooner. Maybe then I would have started scrubbing sooner."

Wealththeow approached, her hands wet, a cloth wrapped around her forearm. She looked back and forth between the two men, as if examining a wound that wasn't quite clean. "The seer is talking about the bog again," she said. "He's painting pictures of things to come. The men are listening and pretending not to take it seriously. But their hands are slowing down."

"Men are bad at multitasking," Skari remarked from the background. "Scrubbing and being afraid at the same time – that's overwhelming."

“Then they should do one thing at a time,” Wealtheow said. “First scrub, then be afraid. But they will have to do both.”

She looked at Beowulf. "You know this won't stop at one arm," she said. "You can see it in your own face."

He wanted to disagree, purely on principle, because he hated it when others read him like a bad fortune-telling bowl. But he sensed she was right. There was no feeling of "finished" inside him. More like "interim status." That's what victories feel like that are just pauses.

“If she comes,” he finally said, “she won’t come through the door.”

"How do you know that?" asked Skari.

Beowulf looked up at the roof, at the dark, sooty beams. "Because every idiotic son takes the same door as his parents," he said. "But mothers are different. They come from the side. From below. From where no one looks, because everyone's staring at the hole something's already fallen out of."

Wealththeow nodded slowly. Hrothgar remained silent. Osric in the corner grinned crookedly, as if he had been waiting for that exact sentence.

"Then keep your eyes open," said the Queen. "We won't want to be surprised again. One time an arm, the next a son. The second time it might be something we can't hang from the beam anymore."

The cleaning dragged on. By afternoon, the biggest stains were gone or had faded into pale shadows that were acceptable if you didn't look too closely. The buckets were emptier, the hands more tired, the voices quieter.

Only the arm hung unchanged: blacker, heavier, an outrageous proof that some things defy cleaning.

Beowulf sat down again, letting his shoulder rest. The bone music had found a new rhythm: scrubbing, sighing, buckets clattering, flies buzzing. And somewhere deep beneath it all, under the noise, he heard another sound, one that didn't come from the hall. A slow, plodding gurgle, like water moving in a deep hole.

He knew he was only hearing it in his head. Maybe.

Herot cleaned away the blood. But the bog washed nothing. It collected. And Beowulf suspected that no brush in the world would remove the filth that the next night would bring.

By evening, the hall was clean enough that one could get drunk again without slipping on entrails with every sip. That was the ultimate goal of such cleaning: not purity, just functionality. Heorot now looked like an old boxer whose face had been wiped clean. The bruises remained; only there were no longer shirt fibers stuck in the wounds.

The floor was stained, but dry. The worst puddles were gone, the grooves filled with pink water residue had disappeared, or at least been forced into the cracks. You could still see where someone had died if you looked – but most people deliberately looked away.

The arm was the only part that didn't pale. On the contrary. The more they rubbed around it, the more clearly it stood out, like a command, like an accusation. The skin tightened in places, swollen in others. The mucus dripped more slowly, but heavier. It was as if it were deciding how it wanted to smell.

The flies were now an army unto themselves. Fat, plump bodies that settled in folds of skin, on cracked nails, at the edges of the wound that had once become a shoulder. If someone came too close, they rose up, a brief black swirl, then settled again a moment later. You could watch them and know: everything that lives loves decay. It is food.

Beowulf sat again, a little apart, with his back against a pillar, his legs stretched out. He wasn't drunk—not yet—but not sober either. Somewhere in between, in that thin strip where you can see clearly enough to know why you're about to drink again.

Wulfgar had finally given up on his broomstick and now used it as a makeshift walking stick. He had a slight limp, his knees aching from constant bending and yesterday's fight. He sat down next to Beowulf, slumped heavily, and groaned excessively loudly.

“I swear,” he growled, “fighting that beast was easier than this crap. You hit it, it bellows, you grab onto its arm, something tears, done. But here: scrubbing, scrubbing, and in the end the stain looks at you and says: Nope.”

"Blood is more stubborn than brains," said Beowulf. "That's why there are more drunken heroes than clean floors."

Skari joined them, simply plopped down on the ground, his back against the same pillar. A piece of wood pierced his shoulder; he grimaced briefly and then left it like that. "I have a new respect for women," he said. "They do this more often. They know how to clean it all up and still cook, laugh, and have children the next day. We stand in the dirt for a minute and act like we're martyrs."

“I already had respect for them,” Wulfgar said. “That’s why they sleep with me. They sense that.”

Skari snorted. "They sleep with you because you smell of mead and not fear. That's often enough."

The skald had taken his place again by the fire, which was now burning anew, weaker, more cautiously. His harp lay in his lap, and he stroked a string with his thumb, again and again,

always the same note. Not a song, only a background hum. One could sense that entire verses were already vying for space in his mind.

Unferth stood a few steps away, arms folded, looking like someone constantly on the verge of insulting someone but too tired to think of a new word. His gaze lingered on Beowulf, then shifted back to the arm, then back again. Constantly alternating, as if he had to place the two images side by side and compare them.

"There's no party today, is there?" Skari asked.

“Yes,” said Wulfgar. “But more quietly. Today they don’t drink to shout. Today they drink to not hear.”

Wealththeow arrived with a jug, silently placed it between them, and three cups. The mead was thinner today, diluted with water. One realized that even the provisions were only human: finite, vulnerable.

"Drink up," she said. "But remember, you'll have to be on your feet tomorrow."

"I'm falling gracefully," Wulfgar murmured.

“You fall loudly,” she corrected. “That’s something else.”

She lingered for a moment, gazing at the mounds of freshly closed graves visible in the distance through the open gate. “We told them the danger had passed,” she murmured. “They need that. Otherwise, they won’t work. But in the eyes of those old men back there…” She gestured toward the gray-bearded men leaning on their brooms like ancient spears. “…in their eyes, I see they know we lied.”

“You know that nothing is truly forbidden,” said Beowulf. “Only postponed. Like debts that are put off until another day. Eventually, they will be collected. Perhaps later, perhaps somewhere else. But they will come.”

Wealththeow nodded, as if she had expected precisely that answer. "Then make sure you're still here when the cashier comes," she said. "Otherwise, it'll all fall on these people again." Her gaze swept over the women, the children, the elderly. Those who could no longer hold a spear, or hadn't yet.

Hrothgar approached them, walking slowly, as if each step were being negotiated. He looked tired, but in a different way than yesterday. Yesterday he had been empty. Today he carried weight again. That didn't make it better, just different.

“In the evenings I want music again,” he said to the skald. “Not just about the arm. About everything. About the past. About times when we thought this was just a place to sing and drink.”

“If I sing how it was,” said the skald, “they will realize that it was never as they now have it in their heads.”

"Then sing off-key," said Hrothgar. "The truth is never perfectly in tune."

He turned to Beowulf. “I told the men that you will stay until we know whether he is dead or just limping.”

“I’m staying,” said Beowulf. “I don’t want anyone to continue the story and end up claiming I wasn’t there for the second round.”

Wulfgar grinned. "Besides, your back screams at you when you get into the boat," he added. "You can't even get up the side."

"Shut your mouth," muttered Beowulf, but he couldn't suppress a crooked smile.

The afternoon dragged on. No mead-fueled laughter, no loud games. Only the quiet, hard work of dealing with a catastrophe. Here a sign repaired, there a table patched, here a nail hammered in again, there a blanket hung over a particularly ugly spot.

Eventually, they brought fragrant herbs and hung them in bunches from the beams, right next to the arm. The contrast was grotesque: delicate, dry leaves next to that heavy piece of meat. The smell mingled, not improving. Only becoming more complicated.

Beowulf thought of other places. Of port cities where the water ran red with the blood of the night in the morning, and where at midday the children played in the same spot as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Of fields where men had died, and where, months later, grain stood. Everything moved on. Always. And yet, something remained.

“I once met a man,” he said suddenly, more to himself than to the others, “who said that every hall, every city, every dung heap in this world has a certain amount of blood it has to drink. When it’s full, the worst things are over. Maybe Heorot is full now.”

Skari snorted. "Who was that? A drunken philosopher with too much time on his hands?"

"He was a blacksmith," said Beowulf. "And he was right to have lied. Places never get full. They only get used to the taste."

Osric had been sitting near the entrance the whole time, like a dog unsure whether it belonged. He raised his head now. "This hall here," he said, "hasn't finished drinking. It's only taken a sip of the wrong thing. It knows that. And whatever's out there—it knows that too."

"You're making me grumpy," said Wulfgar.

“I’m just amplifying what’s already screaming in your heads,” Osric replied. “You’re trying to calm yourselves with water. Meanwhile, the swamp is taking its measure.”

The shadows grew longer. The sun, if it was there behind the gray sky, did what it always did: it disappeared without a word. A few torches were relit, the smoke settling back into its old place in the ceiling.

Wealththeow stopped the cleaning. "Enough is enough," she had said. "Otherwise, we'll scrub the hall raw and end up standing in the rain." The women put down their rags, the buckets stood empty, their hands red and swollen. Some dipped them in cold water, others just blew on them briefly.

Hrothgar had bread brought, some thin stew, a few jugs of mead – less, more controlled. No one was to fall unconscious from their stool today. At least not until it was clear whether the night would remain silent.

They ate quietly. The noise level was low, muffled. Between bites, the small sounds could be heard again: the crackling of the fire, the occasional creak of a beam, the buzzing of flies on the arm, a cough, a suppressed sob somewhere in the back.

The skald began to sing. This time it wasn't the big "Beowulf tears off the monster's arm" piece. He'd already belted that out yesterday. Today he sang a slower song, one of halls that are ancient, of men who think they can drown their guilt in mead, of women who wipe away blood by day and pretend to sleep by night.

He included the arm, yes, but not as a trophy. More as a memorial. One rhyme for "hand," one for "brand," one for "burned." It was awkward, sometimes the text stumbled, but that's precisely what made it more truthful than the polished heroic songs.

Beowulf listened, cup in hand, but he drank slowly. The words crept into him, settling somewhere between his ribs and scar.

Unferth sat two benches away, his gaze fixed on the table. When the song reached a verse about "those who remained silent when the door opened," he flinched slightly. Not much, but Beowulf saw it.

"He's got you in there," Skari murmured.

"That's fine," said Beowulf. "Everyone gets their line. Some only between the rhymes."

Night crept closer. Outside, it settled over the moor, the trees, the graves. Inside, it settled over faces, darkening the circles under the eyes, deepening the lines.

Hrothgar insisted the door be double-locked this time. Not because he believed one bolt would stop a monster that had been there before, but because men had to do something. Bolts are fine when you have nothing better.

Beowulf stayed near the door. Not directly in front of it, but positioned so he could be the first to look at any sound. Wulfgar sat down only slightly further away. Skari found the shade of a pillar from which he could see both the entrance and the fire. Bragi placed his spear and shield within easy reach. Even Unferth had a knife close at hand this time.

"When it comes back," Wulfgar said quietly, "it will know that the way is clear. It knows the hall."

“If it comes again,” said Beowulf, “it will be different. Injured animals are like cheated men. They don’t use the same door twice.”

Osric laughed softly, a dry, unpleasant sound. "You will be listening all night," he said. "Every creak, every howl, every drop will be a clue. And in the end, perhaps nothing will come of it. Or something that passes through the walls because it has always been there."

"Shut up," Wulfgar growled.

“I speak for those who cannot speak,” Osric replied. “For the beams, for the water, for those who lie out in the bog and were not buried.”

The hall slowly quieted down. One after another, they lay down, half-dressed, their weapons within easy reach. The voices grew quieter, then murmurs, then isolated curses uttered in their dreams.

Beowulf remained seated. Sleep held no appeal for him. Too many images flashed before his eyes. His upper arm was a black block in the gloom. It seemed to grow larger the fewer torches burned.

Eventually, Wealhtheow sat down next to him again. She wasn't holding a cup or a bowl. She was only holding herself.

"You won't sleep tonight," she said. There was no question about it.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said.

“Maybe not at all,” she replied. “Men like you rarely sleep. They just sometimes pass out.”

He grinned wearily. "As long as I'm tipping forward, everything's fine."

She looked for a moment at the door, then at the roof, then at the arm. "When she comes," she said, "she won't scream before she strikes. Mothers learn to walk quietly."

“Then we will listen to the silence,” said Beowulf.

Outside, the wind blew across the moor, sweeping through some dark pool of water where perhaps a body lay licking its own wound. Inside, Heorot creaked softly. The cleaning was over. The hall seemed cleaner. But beneath the thin layer of water, herbs, and weariness, the same old guilt still lingered.

Beowulf sat there and waited. Again. Just like that night before Grendel came. Only now something inside him was different: he knew what it felt like when a monster's arm gave way. And he also knew that some things, when you tear something off them, don't simply disappear, but take someone who won't accept the hole.

Night fell. The last torch on the wall burned down, the smoke crept upwards, the arm dripped in the dark, quietly, steadily.

Herot had wiped away the blood. But the ground was still wet underfoot in the coming night.

CHAPTER 10 – The Mother from the Swamp

Night didn't simply arrive; it crept in. Slowly, heavily, like a fat guest who knows perfectly well he's unwelcome and insists on every creak of the floorboards for that very reason. Heorot creaked back. The hall was clean enough not to smell of fresh blood anymore, but far from

seeming innocent. You could wipe everything clean, except for what was embedded in the wood and in people's minds.

Beowulf was still sitting in his usual spot near the door. He had leaned his back against a post, as if testing who would break first. His shoulder throbbed in time with his own heartbeat, a small, nervous drum that wouldn't stop no matter how quiet the room became. The bandage smelled of ointment, old herbs, and the sweat of the man who had applied it. There was nothing heroic about it. It was just the common, everyday stench of work and pain.

The men lay scattered like bad decisions. Some at the back of the hall, curled up on blankets, others half-sitting against the walls, heads slumped on their chests, hands still near handles, as if afraid sleep was just a trap. Wulfgar lay not far from Beowulf, his spear beside him, his beard tucked into his collar. He pretended to be asleep, but every breath was too conscious. A truly asleep man doesn't think about how he sounds.

Skari sat in the shadow of a beam, knees drawn up, back against the wall, like someone who had spent his whole life trying to present as little surface area as possible. He played with a small bone between his fingers, rolling it through his joints again and again. No oracle this time. Just something to keep his hands occupied, so they wouldn't show how much they wanted to tremble.

The arm hung above everyone like a forgotten thought of God. In the dim light, it was nothing more than a shapeless, dark lump, but one knew what it was, even without seeing it clearly. The smell crept on, slower, sweeter, putrid. It settled in the throat, mingling with the smoke and the memory.

Outside was the moor. Beowulf didn't need to see it. He knew this kind of darkness. It was different from the darkness in cities, different from the darkness at sea, different from the darkness in mountains. Moor darkness was wet. It crept into your shoes before it crept into your heart. It was patient. It didn't need paths; it made its own.

The wind didn't blow. It crept. It groped its way along the hall, brushing against the cracks where the cold had lived for years. You couldn't even really hear it, just an occasional, thin whistle somewhere in the rafters. Like an old animal that no longer has the strength to howl and only breathes shallowly.

Osric, the thin seer, had curled up again near the door, as if wanting to be the first to know from which direction the next mistake would come. He sat there like a folded crow's wing, his eyes half-closed, but never fully. Every now and then he murmured something. No grand prophecies, just fragments. "Water," Beowulf heard once. "Depth." Another time: "Not from above. Never from above."

Beowulf ran his hand across the floor. Dry. Warm from the fire, which smoldered more than burned. This was how a hall should have felt at night: warm, safe, drunken. Instead, he felt like he was sitting in a belly where something was rumbling.

He thought of Grendel. Not of the fight, not of the tear, not of the arm that hung there now. He thought of the moment the bastard had fled. That limping, staggering path, which had carried more horror than pride. There had been something in his eyes that he couldn't forget: that brief flash of "This can't be happening." Not "This hurts," not "I'm dying." More like the pure shock that someone had taken from him something he had believed to be untouchable.

This kind of thing doesn't happen to anyone only once in their life. And nothing in this world goes unanswered.

Beowulf reached for the hip flask on his belt, feeling the familiar coolness of the metal. He unscrewed the cap and took a sip. Not a big one, not a "screw it" swig, more of a "stay awake" swig. The alcohol burned through the coating in his mouth, settled in his stomach, giving him that dirty, faint feeling of "I'm still here."

"You're drinking like someone who's still expecting something," Skari murmured from the darkness.

“I drink like one who doesn’t know if he wants to live to see the next hour sober,” Beowulf replied.

"Being sober is overrated," said Wulfgar, who still kept his eyes closed. "Sober men see monsters, drunk men see women. Both can be deadly, but at least with women you die more slowly."

"You're about to snore, and that's louder than any monster," said Skari.

"If anything comes out of the bog," Wulfgar grumbled, "it will turn around again when I snore. I'm a walking security service."

The hall grinned briefly, inwardly. Words were thin blankets, but better than nothing.

The skald was silent today. His harp lay beside him, but his hands rested upon it as if they had had enough of strings. He looked neither at the door, nor at his arm, nor at the men. He stared into the fire, into that small heap of embers that pretended to be a sun. Perhaps he was searching there for the next verse. Perhaps he was searching there for an escape route.

The hours crawled by. It was the kind of night where no proper clock would work, even if they had one. Units of time here were: torch burns down – once. Someone turns over in their sleep – twice. A beam creaks – three times. A drop falls from an arm to the floor – four times. And all of this started again.

Beowulf eventually noticed that the wind outside had grown quieter. Not because it had stopped—quite the opposite. It was simply no longer the only sound. Somewhere far away, but not too far, another sound could be heard: a dull, irregular gurgling, as if something heavy were being pulled through deeper water. Not a river. Not rain. Rather, a movement the water hadn't chosen itself.

He straightened up a little. His shoulder protested immediately, a sharp thud of pain. He ignored it.

"Do you hear that?" he asked quietly.

Skari held the bone still. Wulfgar opened one eye. In the hall, the smaller sounds gradually subsided: the coughing, the rustling, the muffled snoring. As if the silence had given a command.

There it was again. A heavy, dragging sound, muffled by water yet distinct enough to creep into your gut. Not a pounding step on solid ground, more like "something pulling itself through something that wants to hold it back."

Osric raised his head. "She's moving," he whispered.

"Who?" asked Wulfgar, even though he knew the answer.

“The one who fell into its emptiness,” Osric said. “You tear away a piece of an animal that is as big as a life, and you think only the animal screams?”

Beowulf stood up fully now. Slowly, but finally. His legs felt like wood that had already been lit. Nevertheless, they carried him. He took a few steps forward, closer to the door.

"Take your time," Skari said dryly. "You might trip before she gets here. Then the bards can sing later that you died in your sleep."

Beowulf ignored him. His gaze was fixed on the planks, as if he could see through them, directly into the bog. Images formed in his mind: a figure darker than the water, heavier than the mud, with eyes that had been buried too long to find light kind. One who had lost something that could not grow back.

“When she comes,” he said loudly enough for Wulfgar and Skari to hear, “she won’t burst noisily through the door like the son. She’ll creep to the edge. And take exactly what hurts.”

"Then she should take me," Wulfgar growled. "I'm big, I'm loud, I'm an invitation."

“She doesn’t take anyone who offers,” Osric said from his seat. “Mothers have a sense of where the gap is that hurts the most.”

Beowulf thought of Hrothgar, of his old men, of the few heads that still held a semblance of authority. He knew what the seer meant. When you tear a piece of meat from a king's hall, you don't take the loudest one. You take the one whose absence leaves the greatest silence.

He placed his hand on the door frame. The wood was cool, slightly damp. The crack beneath it was breathing. No bolt in the world could stop water that had been pressing in long enough.

Inside, Hrothgar stirred somewhere in the front. He had slept briefly, that restless, ragged sleep of a man who knows the night owes him something. He sat up, wiped his face with his hand as if trying to banish old memories.

"What is it?" he shouted, his voice rough. "Do you hear something?"

“Water,” said Beowulf. “And something in it that is not alone.”

The hall tensed. Men straightened, gripped handles, searched for their own feet as if for old friends. It was the same kind of tension as before Grendel's first appearance, but deeper. Back then, they had waited for something they knew stories about. Now they waited for the answer to a debt whose magnitude they themselves did not know.

Outside, the gurgling grew louder. Not much, but enough for anyone who wasn't completely sane to hear it. Something was moving through the moor, not quickly, not frantically – but resolutely.

Beowulf still held the hip flask in his hand. He looked at it, turned it over, screwed the cap on. Put it away. This was no time for additional veils before his eyes.

"Stay away from the door," he said. "When she comes, she wants to see who's important here. Don't let her see our whole damn selection right away."

It wasn't heroic, but it was clever. A few men slid back, seeking the shadows, trying to appear small. Others stayed where they were – not out of courage, but because they were too proud to retreat when the stranger shouted at them.

The sounds outside suddenly ceased. No more movement, no gurgling water, no rustling. Only the wind, briefly brushing against the roof ridge. This silence was worse than any stomping.

"Now she's holding her breath," Osric whispered. "So we can hear ours louder."

Beowulf felt his own pulse in the hand that touched the doorpost. It was as if the hall itself were thumping along with him. The arm above them dripped once, a heavy, sluggish drop that splashed onto the floor.

The mother from the mire wasn't in the hall yet. But she wasn't far enough away to even imagine her. She was out there somewhere, in the darkness, underwater, in the mud. And she had time.

Beowulf knew he was back where he'd been before: stuck between a wooden frame and a problem too big to be easily pushed aside. He was tired, hungover, ragged, and not at his best. But life rarely asks if you're fit before it dumps something on your doorstep.

He took a deep breath, tasting the peat in the air, even though the planks separated him from the water. And somewhere, deep in that damp, cold nothingness out there, something opened its eyes, something that hadn't forgotten what had been taken from it.

Night had fallen. The mother had moved. The rest wouldn't be long in coming.

The waiting was eating away at them. It was like when you're a child lying in bed, knowing there's nothing under the mattress—but your heart hadn't received the message. The hall breathed shallowly. No one spoke anymore. Even Wulfgar had run out of witty remarks. He sat upright now, spear in hand, his broom somewhere behind him, as if he'd realized that today's task was about other things.

The water outside fell silent as suddenly as it had begun to flow. No more gurgling, no more smacking, no more "something passing through something" sound. Just silence. And that was the worst part. Silence is like a knife you can't yet see.

Beowulf felt the hairs on his arms stand on end. His body knew more than his head. His head tried to remain logical: planks, posts, earth, some moving water. His body said: Screw logic, something's coming.

Then it came. Not where everyone was standing. Not at the door, not at the window slits, not up on the roof where the wind whistled through the cracks. It came from below.

At first, there was only a smell. As if someone had cut a piece of the moor and carried it in here. Damp, musty, old. Not the smell of Grendel—that had been blood and old sweat and wet stone. This smelled deeper. Like a lake that swallows everything and digests nothing.

The floor in the front part of the hall gave a soft creaking sound. One of the Danes, who had been half-asleep leaning against a table, jumped and looked down. "Did you—"

He didn't finish. The ground beneath him bulged. Not much, just a few fingers' width. Boards that had sagged for years because men had stepped on them and spilled beer on them lifted up, as if something were breathing underneath.

"Get out of the way!" roared Beowulf, but the voice came a second too late.

The boards splintered. Not like dry wood, more like something that had soaked in water for too long. Splinters, mud, and dark sludge sprayed out. From the midst of this mixture shot upwards something that looked like both a hand and a root. Long, bony, but not as grotesquely oversized as Grendel's paw. The fingers were longer, thinner, with webbing between them that shimmered in the firelight. Clinging to them were shreds of plants, strands of seaweed, and something white that could have been bone.

The hand grabbed the Dane by the ankle. He cried out, a short, sharp, surprised scream, then he was pulled down. No dramatic lifting, no swinging, no showmanship. It was as if the ground simply decided that this man now belonged to it. He fell, pulling half the table down with him, flailing his hands at anything within reach. Someone tried to grab him, even managing to grab his arm, but the force pulling from below was stronger. A disgusting squelch, a tear, a crack—and the Dane was gone. Only a torn shoe remained.

The hole in the ground remained open. It wasn't large, just enough for a person to squeeze through if pulled hard enough. Beneath it was nothing but blackness. No dry cavity, no visible bottom. Just something dark that gurgled and then quieted down again.

"Holy shit," Skari breathed. "It's coming through the floor."

Beowulf moved. Finally, there was something to react to. He leaped forward as far as his back would allow, his sword half-drawn, his gaze fixed on the hole. He expected the hand to shoot up again, for someone else to be summoned.

She never came back. Instead, it got wet somewhere else.

The stove.

The fire had burned down; only embers and a few half-living flames still clung to the charred logs. Suddenly, water glowed in the fire. It hissed as if someone had emptied an invisible bowl. Steam rose, thick and white, and something emerged from this steam.

At first, it was just a shape. Dark, upright, heavy. A silhouette emerging from the smoke, as if it had always been there, waiting for the right moment to emerge. Then came the details.

She was smaller than Grendel, but that didn't mean anything. The bastard had been half a mountain. This one was… compact. Dense. The body seemed less tangled, less haphazardly glued together. More like something the world had left alone until the world had bitten first.

The skin—if you could call it that—wasn't as rough as her son's. It was smoother, but with strange furrows, as if water had been working on it for decades. It gleamed, not greasy, more like wet stones. The arms were long, but not ridiculously long, the fingers bony, with those webbed fingers that stretched and relaxed with every movement, like veils.

Her face was the worst part. Not because it was particularly monstrous—it was just so close to a human face that it hurt. The eyes were deep-set, yellowish, and dull, but clear enough to register every movement in the room. The nose was flat and broad, a slit over a mouth that was too big, the lips too thin. Remnants of something clung to her cheeks—perhaps skin from others, perhaps just mud.

And in those eyes there was none of Grendel's dull, arrogant contempt. There was something else: cold, concentrated rage. Not the hysterical roar of a wounded man, but that kind of anger only someone who has had something greater than themselves taken from them knows.

She stood in the middle of the hearth, water dripping from her arms, embers hissing beneath her feet. The smoke crept up her as if trying to hide her. It failed.

The hall froze. Men held their breath, hands clenched around sword hilts, legs wanted to run but stayed still. Somewhere in the back, a child began to whimper, very softly, before a hand was placed over its mouth.

"There," Osric whispered, almost tenderly. "There she is."

She didn't look at Beowulf first. She looked up.

Her gaze followed what hung in the hall like an outrage: her son's arm. She took it in like a knife plunged into her gut that can't be pulled out. You could see something twitch inside her, deep down. Her shoulders tensed, her fingers curled, her mouth parted slightly. No scream, no sound. Just a movement, like when someone gets too much blood flowing to their gums.

Beowulf was now standing to the side, within reach but out of direct sight. He looked at her and knew: This was a different kind of hell. Grendel had been a storm kicking down the door and grabbing everything that moved. She was like water seeping through the crack, where you never look.

"She won't stay long," Skari murmured. "She doesn't have his playful nature."

She moved. No jump, no stamping. She stepped out of the hearth, each step a drop of water dripping from the folds of her skin, hissing as it hit the hot coals. She walked across the hall as if entering an old, familiar room, where only a few things had been rearranged since last night.

Her first glance after the arm wasn't at Beowulf, not at Wulfgar, not at the swords. Her gaze searched for faces. Old, familiar ones, whom she had never seen and yet knew. It lingered on Hrothgar.

The king stood still, as if compelled by a bad joke. His sword was at his side, but his hand was not on the hilt. He stood there like someone waiting for his judge in his own dream.

Her eyes met his. There was a conversation for which neither had words. In her eyes lay: You took my child from me. In his: I did nothing to you personally, and yet I am guilty.

Beowulf knew she'd pick the wrong man. She wouldn't go after the man who'd taken her arm. Not first. That's not how mothers work.

He moved, stepped forward, intending to place himself between her and the king. Her eyes slid toward him, registered him, paused briefly, as if checking whether he was the hand that had torn the arm. He felt her gaze upon him like cold water slowly running up his spine.

She didn't move. Not yet.

Then everything happened too fast for clear thinking.

She darted forward. Not in his direction. To the side. A few steps, almost invisible, and suddenly she stood before one of the older men who had last spoken with Hrothgar. A gray-bearded warrior whose name hung heavy in the hall—*Æ*schere, the one who never fled when others had run. One who had known Hrothgar longer than most here had even lived.

She grabbed him. No dramatic lifting, no grand display. One hand around his neck, the other in his chest, as if checking if his heart was still beating.

Beowulf roared, ran, Wulfgar leaped, Skari drew his knife—but she was faster. A jerk, a rip, a movement that looked as if she were taking a bundle from a shelf. *Æ*schere's body was yanked up, her head briefly struck the beam, blood spurted, not much, just enough to show that something too heavy had been torn away.

Hrothgar screamed. Not a royal scream. An ancient, naked human scream.

She turned away, clutching her body as if it were lighter than her own pain. Her movements seemed suddener, more jerky, less fluid. The plan had been briefly replaced by anger. She needed an exit.

Beowulf was now at her side. He struck, from the hip, as best his shoulder allowed. The sword swung against her side, struck something hard, and slid off. A cut, but not deep enough to stop her. Something dark emerged from the wound, not as slimy as Grendel's, more viscous, denser.

She turned her head and looked at him. There was no respect in her gaze. Only this precise knowledge: You are the one who hurt my child. But you are not the one from whom I will take anything today. Not yet.

She pushed him away. Not with her hands—with her body. A twist, a movement of her hips, as if she'd grown up on a slippery riverbed. He lost his footing, slipped on a wet patch, half-fell, caught himself with his injured shoulder. Pain exploded. The world briefly narrowed and turned red.

Wulfgar was there, roaring, spear in hand. He rammed it at her, aiming for her stomach, her chest, somewhere. She dodged. One small step, her foot in a pool of old water and fresh blood, the spear whizzed past her, struck the pillar, and lodged.

She still held Æschere in her hand. Now she did what Beowulf had feared: she looked up. At his arm.

It was as if she were weighing the two options. The dead son, the severed part, the king's old friend in her hand. Revenge comes in many forms.

She jumped. Not high, but far. Two steps, a push off the ground, and she was standing directly under the arm. Her free hand shot up, her bony fingers gripping the greasy forearm, right where the ropes held it.

The ropes had been good. Strong, tightly knotted. They weren't meant to be pulled on from below by someone who had spent his entire life battling water. The first fiber snapped with a soft "snap," the second with a clearly audible crack.

“No!” someone shouted, but no one knew who.

It ripped. The beam above her groaned, the hall groaned with it. A piece of wood splintered, dust trickled down. Then the knot gave way. The arm slid, swung, slammed against the beam, dropped more slimy stuff – and was in her hand.

She now held two things: what had been taken from her, and what she had taken for herself. A balance one only sees when staring too long into the abyss.

Beowulf rose again, sword in hand, ready for a second blow. Wulfgar desperately yanked the spear from the pillar. Skari dragged herself across the ground to reach her legs. Hrothgar stood frozen, his hands outstretched as if he could summon Æschere with a mere gesture.

She jumped. This time towards the wall. Not towards the door, not towards the stove, not towards the hole in the floor. She chose the weakest spot in the masonry – the wood that had seen water more often than was good for it.

The sound of the break was an ugly splintering. Not a heroic bang, more the snapping of things that had lasted too long. Boards flew, a cold rush of night broke in, rain, wind, the smell of marshland.

For a moment, she could be seen outside in the frame of the torn wall: the dark figure, Æschere slumped on one side, her arm on the other, the water dripping from her skin, the wind tugging at her as if it wanted to take her away again.

Beowulf threw himself forward as fast as his battered body would allow. He stretched out his hand toward her as if he could grab her heel and pull her back into the hall. His fingers grasped at empty air.

She was already outside.

The night swallowed them almost instantly. Only a movement in the darkness, a heavy shadow stretching towards the moor. The gurgling sound returned, louder now, closer, then farther away. And then, finally, nothing.

The wind lingered in the hall. It passed through the open wound in the wall, brushed against faces, the fire, the tables. It carried the scent of moorland, mingled with something else: loss.

Hrothgar collapsed. Not spectacularly, not with a cry. He simply crumpled in on himself, as if someone had ripped the bones from his body. Men rushed to him, Wealththeow shouted his name, the skald dropped his harp.

Beowulf stood there, panting, sword in hand, shoulder burning, his gaze fixed on the hole in the wall. Outside, there was only darkness.

“She got him,” said Osric. “And took what we dangled in front of her. Now the score is settled. Not for her. For us.”

Skari spat on the ground. "Complete, my god," he growled. "She ripped one of ours out that was still standing. And we're sitting here staring blankly."

Beowulf felt the mead move in his stomach. Not rising, not falling. It was simply there, heavy, along with the guilt that no one could bear alone.

He knew what would come next. Not now, not in this second, as everyone stared at the gaping wall. Later. When the initial panic had subsided, when Hrothgar's screams had faded into a soft whimper. Then they would look to him. To the stranger. To the arm-ripper. To the man who had begun what the Mother now intended to finish.

The mother from the mire had vanished, but she had left a trace: a hole in the ground, a hole in the wall, a hole in an old king. And somewhere out there, a lake waited, demanding more than had been taken from it.

Beowulf raised his sword, looked at the blade, at the sharpening marks, the old nicks. "Very well," he murmured. "If she's going to drag us to the water, then we'll just go there before she comes back."

But that wasn't a decision for that night. That was one for the next morning. And the hall hadn't finished screaming yet.

For a while, no one stood up. It was as if the crack in the wall had torn a crack in everyone's back. The wind now came in unimpeded, sweeping across the floor, driving through traces of blood, water, and splinters. The torches flickered indignantly, as if they hadn't asked for this extra work.

Hrothgar's scream still hung in the air, though it had now fallen silent. He knelt on the floorboards, his hands in the void, where Æschere had just been standing. It looked as if he were clinging to the Unseen One to keep from falling. Wealhtheow was beside him, one hand on his back, the other in his, as if trying to press him back together with a mere touch.

The old king had shrunk. All the layers of military glory, gold, and stories told about him—everything was gone. What remained was a man whose soul had been ripped to the bone.

Beowulf slowly came to. Not because he had fainted—only because the pain in his shoulder and the impact on the planks had momentarily knocked him out. Now he stood, the sword still in his hand, and realized it hung uselessly in the air. She was gone. With her booty. With her message.

The skald picked up his harp, only to drop it immediately. The strings produced a distorted, off-key sound, as if laughing and crying at the same time. "She wrote her own verse," he murmured. "All we can do now is paint rhymes around the edges."

Wulfgar stared at the hole through which she had disappeared. His fingers twitched at the spear shaft, as if they wanted to follow her, but the rest of his body was wiser. "I could have had her," he growled. "One more step, one more bit. Fucking shit."

Skari shook his head. "You would have just been another piece of luggage," he said gruffly. "She saw what she wanted. An old head belonging to the king. And the consolation prize up there from her boy. You weren't on the list."

Osric stood up, slowly, as if his bones were made of glass. He walked to the wall, stopped in front of the splintered wood, and let his gaze drift into the darkness. "She's not gone," he said softly. "She's just back where she came from. Some call that disappearance, others homecoming."

"Shut your mouth with your bog-babble," Wulfgar snarled, without turning around. "She took a man with her who had more backbone than you'll ever see in your life. And you're talking like she stole a goat."

Osric didn't flinch. "To her, he was a goat. A loud, old, well-fed goat with memories of your king. A victim with a face."

Beowulf walked past them slowly, his muscles trembling. He stopped in front of Hrothgar. It felt wrong to look down on the king from above, but the night cared nothing for etiquette.

“Hrothgar,” he said. His voice sounded foreign. Too rough, too loud for the small space in which the king sat.

The old man looked up. There was nothing royal left in his eyes, only raw, unadulterated rage and something deeper: guilt. "You saw him," he whispered. "You saw her take him. See her take his arm. You saw what she left us."

“I saw her running back to where she came from,” said Beowulf. “With one body and one arm, as if they were two stones she was going to throw into her ugly depths.”

“She took Æschere from me,” Hrothgar breathed. “Not just any warrior. Not a face I only saw in cheers. The man who stood beside me when it all began. When we thought we were young enough to laugh in the face of every night. And you…” His gaze hardened. “You let her go.”

The sentence hung in the air, heavy as a hammer that no one had seen coming. Men who had just been staring at the wall now looked at Beowulf. Not all of them, not all at once. But enough to feel the weight.

Beowulf took a deep breath. This hurt. Everything hurt. "I didn't let her go," he said slowly. "I was too late. That's different. I tried to catch her, and the ground beneath me was saturated with the water she brought with her. My shoulder's wrecked. I'm not a god, Hrothgar. I don't lie in the beams just waiting to fall from the sky at the right moment."

Wealththeow looked at him. There was no accusation in her gaze. Only calculation: What more can he do? What more does he want? How much depends on him?

"You two can roll dice to determine who's at fault later," she said coolly. "Right now, we need to make sure the whole hall doesn't wash away."

She was right. Water was still seeping into the corner where the floor had broken open. Not much, but constantly. A damp edge crept through the cracks, finding its way in, like everything that came from the depths.

"Plug the hole," growled Beowulf, pleased with a sentence that made it easy to be right. "Not because it will stop them. Because I don't want to be drowned in my sleep."

Men moved. Finally. Wood was dragged over, planks, old shields, anything they could find. They crammed it into the hole in the ground, roughly, without much logic, just with the panicked energy of people who know that what comes through won't just make them wet. Others ran to the wall, throwing rough blankets and planks in front of the hole they'd made. You couldn't block the wind, but you could pretend you'd tried.

The skald gathered his harp again, ran his fingers over the strings as if testing whether they would still produce any sound. "Are you already writing your song?" Skari asked bitterly.

“No,” said the skald. “I am only trying to remember what it sounds like when a mother tears someone from a house. So that I don’t have to lie later.”

Hrothgar was back on his feet. Unsteady, supported by two men, but he was standing. His face was hard, his eyes hollow. "Æschere is gone," he said, more to himself than to anyone. "She dragged him into her hole, like they've done with so many others. But he was the last one she could just take."

He turned to Beowulf. “You arrived here as a stranger,” he said. “You took the monster’s arm. Tonight you saw his mother reclaim what she could. I am old. My hands are tired. My knees crack with every turn. I can no longer enter her lair. But you can.”

There it was, the task. Raw and heavy as a stone placed in someone's lap. All eyes turned back to Beowulf, as if they were arrows waiting to see whether he would dodge them or take them in the face.

“The bog is not my home,” Beowulf said slowly. “I do not know its depths, its currents, its holes. But I do know this…” He pointed to the hole in the ground, to the broken wall, to Hrothgar’s face. “…and I know what it’s like when something sits in your house at night and laughs at you.”

He sheathed the sword. The movement was a minor ordeal for his shoulder. He didn't let on, or at least he tried to. "Tomorrow," he said. "In daylight. We'll go there. To the lake, to the hole, wherever she lives. We'll look her in the face. This time not in our hall, but in hers."

Wulfgar nodded immediately. "I'll come along," he said without hesitation. "I still have anger left. I don't like to carry it around."

Skari raised his hand. "I don't want to go to Moor," he growled. "But I want even less to hear later that I wasn't there when we explained to a mother that she can't decide alone who dies."

Bragi, who had been silent until then, ran his hand over his beard. "My spear has already been in Grendel's flesh," he said. "It feels wrong to keep it out now."

A few Danes muttered that one of them had to go too. Æschere had been one of them before he became a shadow at Hrothgar's side. Pain makes you brave when you haven't yet grasped how long it will last.

Hrothgar looked at them, one by one. In his eyes flickered something that wasn't just despair. "I won't order you to go," he said. "Too often I've given orders to people who only returned with stories. But I will ask you. For him."

The name didn't need to be said. It was everywhere. In the chair where Æschere had sat, in the stain on the floor where his feet had stood, in the hole in the wall.

Beowulf nodded. "We're leaving," he said. "You stay here and try not to lose any more walls."

Wealththeow stepped closer, his hands wet from holding, not from cleaning. “If you go down into her water,” she said, “she won’t fight like a son who wants to test his strength. She’ll fight like one who has nothing left but anger. You can’t get drunk against something like that.”

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “But I’ll only do it when I’m back up top.”

A few men laughed roughly. Not real laughter, just that short bark that comes when words collide with too much darkness.

The night dragged on like a poorly chewed piece of meat. No one really slept, not even those who tried. Some kept their eyes closed, but saw more. Others just stared into the fire, which no longer seemed to provide any real warmth.

Beowulf stayed awake. He felt the weariness gnawing at him, his body craving more rest than the night offered. But there was something inside him harder than his own flesh. A kind of stubborn, filthy will that said: First a hole, then sleep.

Eventually the sky brightened, without the sun really trying. A pale, tired light seeped through the cracks and windows. The wind outside had died down. The moor was still. And that was no comfort.

They armed themselves as best they could. Shields, spears, swords, a few rough ropes, hooks, torches. One of them brought an old chain, without knowing what it would be good for – but metal is better than nothing.

Hrothgar approached Beowulf and placed something in his hand. Not gold, not jewelry. A small, worn bone pendant. "He wore this," he said. "When he was young. Before he served

me. If you find him down there..." His voice broke. "...give him fire. I don't want him just hanging there."

Beowulf closed his fingers around the small thing. It was warm from Hrothgar's hand, and somehow colder than anything else. "I'll see what I can do," he said. Promises were for gods.

They left the hall. For the first time since the night with Grendel, stepping outside didn't feel like an escape, but like a voluntary descent into something bigger than their stories. Behind them, Heorot was breathing heavily, like an old boxer in the corner.

The path to the bog wasn't far, but long enough that every step posed a question: Why me? Why now? Why at all? Mud splashed, the grass was trampled flat, smoothed by rain and fear.

Osric walked a short distance behind them, as if to see if his visions had legs. He said nothing. His eyes were fixed on the horizon, where the land merged into a gray haze.

Then they saw the lake.

It lay there like a broken mirror. The surface was almost smooth, only in a few places did something stir, as if things were breathing beneath it, things that didn't want to be seen. The water had a color that refused to reveal anything. Not quite black, not quite brown, a heavy, murky something. On the bank lay branches, bones, years of accumulated trash. Remnants of armor, broken shields, things one might prefer not to look at too closely.

The stench was different from the hall. No blood, no smoke. Just stagnant water, algae, old wood, rotting something. And underneath it all, a hint of something metallic, as if weapons, rings, and people had been sunk here more than once.

Wulfgar spat. "If hell has a storeroom, this is what it looks like," he said.

Skari bent down and picked up a piece of helmet that was half-buried in the mud. "There are more stories here than in any hall," he murmured. "Only there's no one left to tell them."

Beowulf stepped to the water's edge. It remained calm. No waves, no stirring. Only that languid, profound indifference of something that has seen too much.

He saw his own reflection. Torn, distorted, the face elongated, the eyes darker. Behind him, the outlines of the men who had come with him. Beyond them, the gray landscape, beyond that, nothing.

“Down there,” he said quietly, more to himself than to the others, “sits a mother with one arm and an old man. And she thinks she now has everything she needs.”

He drew his sword. The metal sounded tired, but reliable. "Then let's go and see if we can't take anything more from her."

The stinking lake lay before them, open like a mouth. The water was silent. But the depths beneath it were not.

And Beowulf knew that the next step would no longer be on wood, but into something that was not made for humans.

CHAPTER 11 – Descent into the Stinking Lake

The lake lay there like a giant "fuck you" in the landscape. No friendly shimmer, no gentle lapping, none of the crap the bards would later croon about. Just a sheet of murky, offended water, acting as if it had every right in the world to keep things that were never meant to resurface.

Beowulf stood at the edge, taking it all in, before he really looked at what he was getting himself into. It wasn't just a bad smell. It was the stench that lingered: stagnant water, rotting plants, wet stone, with a faint hint of iron underneath, as if someone had once tried to fertilize the place with blood. The ground was soft; every step sank a little deeper, as if the lake were testing his feet before taking the rest.

Wulfgar stepped beside him, almost slipped, and caught himself at the last moment with the spear shaft. "If I ever swear again, I'd rather die in the water than by hanging," he muttered, "remind me of this pile here."

“This is not water,” said Skari. “This is old promises that no one kept, and all that no one wanted to bury.”

Bragi poked around in the shallows with his spear. The water rocked sluggishly, dark streaks detached themselves, something white floated briefly to the surface, then disappeared again. "Bones," he said tersely. "So many that you can't count them anymore."

The Danes who had come along stood a little further back. They gazed at the lake as if it had been the true king all along, and Hrothgar merely the fellow who had happened to rent the hall. One of them, a broad-shouldered fellow with a gray beard and a face as if sculpted with the palm of his hand, knelt down and briefly touched the water with two fingers.

"He pulled them in here," he said. "All those we never found. All those from whom we only heard screams. The night was full, the water even fuller."

Beowulf glanced over his shoulder. Behind them, the land lay flat and gray, the hall in the distance just a piece of dull wood against a dull sky. Hrothgar hadn't come along. Just as well. The man would only have shrunk here.

Osric stood slightly apart, as if he didn't want to get too close to the lake. His eyes were wide open, but Beowulf knew that the old bastard was seeing more than what lay before them. "That's not a watering hole," the seer muttered. "That's a mouth. And you're the idiots who decide not only to peer inside, but also to climb behind the teeth."

"Then it's a good thing we have weapons with us," Wulfgar growled. "I'm not going into a maw unarmed."

Beowulf said nothing. He simply stood there, feeling the cold creeping up from the lake. This wasn't like fighting in a hall, not like clashing in a field, not like ships crashing into each other. This was something that defied the rules. The land was the way, the water the boundary; that was how the world was known. If you start fighting within boundaries, you have to expect them to swallow you up.

He tightened the strap of his armor, checked the sword, the position of the knife on the belt, the torch they had wrapped in a wet blanket so it wouldn't be lit until later. Every movement hurt. His shoulder was a single, dull protest, his back felt as if someone had lined it with stones overnight. But it was all just flesh. And flesh had to function when needed.

"How deep is that thing?" Skari asked.

One of the Danes laughed briefly, dryly. "Deep enough that no one came back up."

“Very motivating,” Skari murmured. “Maybe someone will tell me how many of your best men have disappeared here before I jump in. Then at least I’ll know what kind of company I’m joining.”

Wulfgar nudged him with his elbow. "Save that for later," he said. "Once we're out of here, you can whine all you want. Right now, we need your mouth for cursing."

Beowulf knelt down and reached into the water. It was colder than it should have been. Not the normal cold of autumn or winter, but the kind that felt like it came from much deeper down, from a place where no light could reach. He withdrew his hand and watched the drops fall away. They looked thicker than normal water.

He took out the small bone pendant Hrothgar had given him and turned it briefly between his fingers. Æschere's memory, this ugly little piece of the past, now lay in his hand like a mission. He put it away again. "Good morning," he murmured toward the lake. "We're just disturbing you for a moment."

Osric made a sound that was somewhere between a cough and a laugh. "He believes humor is armor," he said quietly. "We'll see if water can laugh."

The question wasn't whether someone went down. The only question was how many and in what order. Beowulf took the first word from the lake.

"I'll go first," he said. "I'm heavy enough to find out if the ground holds anywhere. If something grabs me, you know you shouldn't follow without something sharp in your hand."

“You go first because you couldn’t stand it if one of us screamed first,” Skari said. “Call it what you will.”

Wulfgar stepped closer to the edge. "I'm going in right behind you," he said. "I don't want to stay on land and later have to listen to people saying I just watched you drown."

A few of the Danes muttered that they had to go in too, at least one. Bragi nodded. "One of us will stay up there to spoil the others' stories if we don't come back," he said. "The rest will go where it stinks."

Beowulf shook off his cloak, letting it lie on a narrow, half-dry strip of land. The air bit against his bare skin, but that was better than stepping into the hole with too much fabric. Things that soak up water drag you down. Men, mead, fabric—it's all the same principle.

He slowly waded into the water. The first step was just cold. The second was cold and deep. The bottom was soft and slippery; each foot sank ankle-deep in the mud. By the third step, the

water was at his calves, by the fourth at his knees. It clung to him as if saying, "Finally, someone else!"

The lake was still. No waves, no lapping. Only that faint, revolting sound of mud giving way. Men like Grendel were made of such sounds: things that come from the depths and pretend to have arisen spontaneously.

"You're still alive," Wulfgar called from the shore, more for himself than for Beowulf. "That's good. Keep it up."

“If I stop, you’ll hear it first,” Beowulf replied, and his voice echoed dully over the water, as if it had become too heavy for the air.

By the fifth row of steps, the water was at his hips. It pulled at his armor, his clothes, at everything that had weight. The cold crept up, biting hard into his stomach, his back, his bruised shoulder. The sword felt heavier with every second, but he didn't let go of the grip.

The men on the periphery grew small as he moved away. He turned around briefly, saw their outlines, saw Skari's hunched shoulders, Wulfgar's clenched jaw, the Danes with that mixture of pride and panic in their eyes.

"Still here," he shouted.

"Don't shout like that," said Skari. "If she's sleeping downstairs, I don't want you waking her up with your chatter before you've even landed one blow."

Beowulf turned forward again. The water now reached his chest. Each breath felt heavier, as if not only the air but also the water had weight. He no longer lifted his feet properly, only dragging them forward slowly, feeling his way along each new patch of bottom.

At some point, there was nothing left. No solid ground. Just a slip, a brief moment when the foot moved forward and stepped into nothingness. The body followed. No dramatic fall, nothing that would make a good song. Just a slow tipping, a "Shit, there was something here a second ago," and then the water was everywhere.

It was as if someone who hated him was embracing him. Cold, tight, greedy. It pressed in his ears, his nose, his mouth. He held his breath reflexively, feeling his body panic and want to go upwards, to where ups were.

He opened his eyes. Bad idea. The water was like soup. Dark, murky, with particles slapping him in the face. He couldn't see anything. No outline, no light, no bottom. Just deep, thick filth.

He moved his arms and legs, searching for direction. His body still knew how to swim. On the sea, in rivers, in harbors he wanted to leave. But this wasn't water that wanted to carry him. It wanted to keep him.

His fingers found something hard—a stone, an old helmet, anything. He pushed off, shoving his body forward. The armor was pulling, the sword a burden. He briefly considered letting go. Just for a second. Then came anger. He had worked Grendel with his bare hands, yes, but

this wasn't a fight you wanted to fight naked. If someone took something from you, you at least want to have a piece of steel with you.

The pressure in his ears intensified. It was deep. Much deeper than it had appeared from above. A dirty little calculation ran through his mind: air versus distance. How much further before his body started making its own decisions?

A shadow moved past him. Directly below him, or above him, he couldn't tell. Something large and dark that altered the current. Not a fish. Not a plant. Something that knew he was there.

He felt the water become denser, heavier, as if he were being pressed deeper into a fabric. Somewhere down there had to be bottom. Or something that was acting as bottom.

My lungs were burning now. Already. My body was sending these signals that didn't speak, but screamed: Air. Now. Immediately.

Beowulf gritted his teeth. Every time his body screamed "Now," he could still throw "Later" back at it for a moment. That had been his whole trick in life: to scream "Later" when everything wanted "Now."

He saw nothing. Only darkness. But he sensed he was no longer alone. There was a movement in the water, not like a current, but like a breath. A drawing in, a pushing out. Slow. Heavy. Right in front of him.

He knew he had two, maybe three more moves before he wanted to go up or down, and that would be for good.

So he made the first one.

And went deeper.

The second thought underwater is always the same: I should have taken more breaths. The first is panic, the third is "How much further?", and everything in between is just that stupid pounding in your chest telling you that you're not meant to play fish.

Beowulf hung suspended between everything. Above him, perhaps, was the surface; below him, perhaps, the bottom; all around him, only this black, thick water that felt like swimming through old debts. It wasn't even truly cold anymore. That was the uncanny thing. The cold had lessened the deeper he went. Instead, there was this dense, thick warmth, as if the lake had tipped over into a putrid soup at some point.

He pulled with his arms, kicked with his legs. The armor wouldn't budge, the sword wouldn't budge, his own body wanted to retreat. He held it in front, like you hold an animal on a leash that has long since realized it's going the wrong way.

Something brushed against his leg. Not forcefully, more curiously. A touch that said, "What are you?" Not a human grasp, not a hand. More like something slippery, soft, that retreated before he could strike it.

He had stopped counting time. Sometimes it helps to count… one, two, three… but down here, every heartbeat was its own little eternity, and counting would only have shown how many of them were already gone. So he didn't.

The pressure in his ears changed. First stronger, then suddenly less, as if the depth were deciding it was enough. He felt his feet hit something hard. Not ground that yielded, but a surface that pushed back. Stone.

He half-collided against it, pushed off, felt for purchase with his boots. Rough, uneven, but there. He stood. Underwater, in darkness, on something that wasn't immediately trying to swallow him up. Progress, in its own twisted way.

My lungs were now burning like a hearth fire that no one was controlling anymore. Small pinpricks from within, larger ones, then that deep, animalistic signal: air or it's over.

He felt forward with one hand, the other holding the sword. His fingers glided over the stone, found an edge, then a drop. It was as if he were standing against a wall that bent downwards. Some kind of ledge somewhere deep inside the lake.

He knew he had a decision to make, but honestly, he'd already made it before he even got in the water. Up? Take a breath, get back down, maybe. Or keep going while his body wasn't completely losing it. Reason said "up," his damned pride said "down."

Beowulf had never been particularly good at listening to reason.

He pushed himself away from the wall, letting his body fall a little further. It wasn't an elegant dive, more of a controlled fall, like a stone pretending to swim. The darkness didn't get any darker—it was already all it could be—but something was changing. The air… no, not air, the consistency of the water. It seemed less thin. More… hazy.

Then he saw something. Not a clear image, not a friendly patch of light saying, "This way, you hero." Just a faint glimmer, far below, like the last ember of a dying fire. It didn't flicker. It was there, constant, faint, but real.

There.

His body was now silently screaming for air, every muscle on the verge of making its own decisions and letting water in, simply because it could no longer do otherwise. Beowulf felt this thing inside him, this limit: one more moment, and the fuses would blow.

He kicked his legs, pulled with his arms, as if the glow were above instead of below. Everything inside him wanted to rise, but he was sinking. He heard his own blood rushing, louder than the water.

Something grabbed him. This time not a curious touch, but a grasp. Hard, firm, on the armor, somewhere between his ribs and shoulder. For a moment he thought: That's it. She's got me. Mother is pulling me down to where she keeps her collection.

He whirled around, half-blind, swung the sword around, and struck into the darkness. The blade struck something that was hard again, but not like stone. A jerk—and the hilt came loose.

He realized too late that the jolt pulled him diagonally downwards, towards the glowing light. The water around him suddenly became restless, pulling, pushing, turning. Not a current in the usual sense – more like the feeling of drawing air into a lung.

The body had no choice. It did what bodies do when they think they're dying: it gasped for air. Except there was no air.

The water shot into his lungs like a blast. Gasping, a reflex, a gush of cold, foul-smelling liquid. Everything inside him exploded at once: nausea, pain, burning, black spot. World gone.

He tasted rotten mud, traces of blood, metal, something old. Everything that had ever ended up in that lake seemed to have left a part of it in that one sip.

The rest was just a fall. No more conscious swimming, no plan. The body twitched, cramped, thrashed about. The hands almost let go. Almost.

Then suddenly there was no more water around his head. Only something else.

Something hit him from the side, hard, like a battering ram. One last push, one dirty shove – and then he tore through a layer that felt like breaking through wet, cold skin.

He hit stone. Hard. The world went white for a moment, then black, then something again that, with a great deal of imagination, could be described as "visible." He rolled across the rough ground, spat out water, coughed, gagged, as if his body were trying to turn itself over.

Air.

She wasn't good. She smelled of old death, damp rock, mold, and some putrid mixture of everything that had ever arrived down here. But she was air. He sucked it in, greedily, panting, coughed again, spat, more air, more coughing. His lungs burned like a freshly opened wound, but with each breath, the fire of panic turned to rage.

He lay there, half on his side, half on his back, the sword still in his hand, as if a part of him had decided it would rather let that hand fall off than loosen the grip. Water dripped from his hair, his armor, his beard. Everything about him was wet, heavy, sticky.

It took him a while to realize that he was still alive.

He opened his eyes fully. The glimmer he had seen in the water was now a haze of sickly green lights. They weren't torches. More like some kind of musty glow emanating from lichens or fungi on the walls. It was enough to make out outlines: rock, wet and smooth in some places, rough in others, stalagmites, or something that looked like them. A cave. Deep beneath the lake.

He heard water. Not that dull, heavy water from above, but rivulets, drops, little streams, meandering through cracks. And he heard something else: a dull, drawn-out sound, like breathing, but louder. Deeper. Slower.

He tried to stand up. His body protested, but he managed to get halfway to his knees, then to his feet. His lungs were still acting up, coughing up residual water, but he was standing.

He looked around.

It was a place one might call "a monster's hall" in stories, if one didn't know what real halls felt like. The floor was uneven, sometimes smooth stone, sometimes a mixture of rubble, bones, and things that looked like old suits of armor fused to the rock. Organic matter clung to the walls: algae, fungal mycelia, slimy streaks. The light came from a green glow that collected in puddles where something living glowed.

And everywhere lay things that had once been people, or at least human belongings. Helmets, shields, swords, spearheads, chains, rings, cups. Some rusty, corroded, others astonishingly well preserved, as if the water had loved them. Scattered among them were bones. Unidentified, not neatly sorted. Skulls by the feet, ribs by the weapons. It wasn't a grave. It was a collection.

In a corner, half-submerged by a black pool that looked even deeper, lay something that resembled a heap of flesh. A body. It took Beowulf a moment to realize it was Æschere. Or what was left of him.

He lay askew, his limbs twisted, his head turned away. It was clear he hadn't simply fallen. He had been placed there. Not lovingly, not disrespectfully. Just laid down, as if he were just another object in that goddamn basement.

Beowulf felt something inside him harden. Not the kind of hardening that comes with mead, but something deeper. A knot. A stone.

He took a few steps toward the body, felt something crack under his boots. He didn't look down. He didn't want to know if it was bones or old shells.

"So we've arrived," he murmured, more to himself than to the dead man. "That was the lowest I could go today."

His breathing grew louder. It wasn't coming from his own chest. It was coming from the front, somewhere in the darker part of the cave, where the green light was fading and there was more shadow than rock.

Beowulf raised his sword and straightened up as far as he could. He felt as if he were stuck somewhere between drowning and freezing to death, but it didn't matter. His body stood. And as long as he stood, he could strike.

"Come on," he said into the darkness. "Show me what kind of mother you are."

The cave responded. Not with words. With movement.

Something emerged from the shadows. Slowly. Not like a leap, more like the growth of something that had always been there. A figure pushed its way into the greenish half-light, larger than expected, wider, its skin glistening wetly, its eyes like two dim lanterns in a crooked grimace.

The mother from the mire had returned home. In her hand she held something that looked like a torn-off helmet—or a skull with metal still embedded in it. Beside her, half in the water, half

on stone, Beowulf saw the severed arm she had taken from Heorot. It lay there like a perverse memento, a piece of history no one wanted to hear about anymore.

She stopped, breathing slowly and deeply, with a sound that said: Down here, I'm in charge.

Beowulf stood opposite her, dripping wet, coughing, armed with a sword, with a dead man at his back and a king in the distance who had burdened him with more than could fit into a single body.

The descent was over. Now there were only two directions: further down – or out.

And he knew she was in no hurry. Heartbroken mothers are patient killers.

They stood facing each other like two bad jokes no one wanted to hear anymore. He, a half-drowned bastard with an aching shoulder and a sword heavier than was good for him. She, a wet nightmare with eyes that had seen more than any god had ever recorded. And all around them, this cavern that looked as if all the bad decisions of the last few decades had been dumped here and forgotten.

Her breathing made sounds that couldn't have come from a human chest. Long, deep, bubbly, as if water were being drawn through a broken bellows. Every inhalation said: This is mine. Every exhalation said: And you are not.

Beowulf could still feel his lungs burning. Every breath was a compromise: half air, half residual seawater. But at least he wasn't standing in the water anymore. The ground beneath him was stone, uneven, slimy in some places, dry in others. He wiggled his toes in his boots, searching for purchase.

She began to move, slowly, as if she had all the time in the world and knew he didn't. Her steps weren't a stamp like Grendel's. It was a shuffling glide, half foot, half something in between. The webbing between her fingers glittered in the green light, stretching and relaxing with every slight movement of her hand.

She didn't walk like an animal. She walked like someone who once knew what walking was, and then forgot it because water became more important than the ground.

"All right," said Beowulf, more to occupy his own mind than to tell her anything. "This is our little chat."

He made the first move. That was important. Fighting is like drinking: whoever hesitates first gets picked up last. He moved sideways, not directly towards her, looking for an angle that would allow him to have at least one side of his back against the wall, so that nothing would suddenly wake up behind him.

She followed him with her eyes. They were dull, yes, but not blind. There was something in her gaze that neatly categorized things: movement, weight, breathing rhythm, weaknesses. She wasn't a wild beast. She was something far worse: someone who had thought things through.

His boot slipped on a slick patch. A moment, a tiny, ugly moment, in which he felt the body want to move sideways. The memory of drowning came flooding back, those seconds in the lake when the body had already decided to go on without him.

He recovered. His muscles tore, his shoulder screamed, but he was standing again.

Her lips parted slightly. It wasn't a smile. More like that faint, cold flash on a barkeeper's face when you stagger to the bar and he knows: two more pints and you'll be throwing up all over the floor for free.

She came closer. Not in one leap, but step by step. No hasty run, no sudden explosion. She was the only one down here who wasn't in a hurry.

Beowulf knew he couldn't let her decide again which way to strike. In the hall, she had taken her old husband like a child choosing the best piece of meat. Down here, there was no hall, no king, no audience. Only him, her, a dead Æschere, and a stage of stone.

He went inside.

The sword swung from right to left, from the hip, low, aiming for the stomach, the flank, anything more important than skin. The blade sang its dry song, a rough metallic sound in the damp air.

She reacted as if she'd seen that movement before. Maybe on some other idiot who'd thought steel was the answer. Maybe on his own shadow. She turned, not much, just half a step, and the blow swept across her side, tearing skin, letting a dark, viscous fluid ooze out. No splash, no pretty splash pattern for the song. It was more like cutting into a moldy sack from which some thick, miserable liquid was dripping.

She hissed. Softly. No roar, no show. Just a short, venomous exhalation. A hand shot out, fingers spread, webbed feet stretched taut like tattered sails.

He couldn't get away quickly enough. The hand caught him on the chest, just below the shoulder. No claws, but the force was there. He was thrown back, slamming hard against a rocky outcrop. The air rushed from his lungs, but this time without water. Progress.

He slid down the wall, saw stars that weren't there down here. His ribs felt as if someone had tried to expand them from the inside. The sword was still in his hand, sort of.

She came back. Not like a raging bull, more like that kind of wave that hits you on the beach when you think you're safe: suddenly, from the side, with more weight than you expected.

He rolled away as best he could. His hand crashed into the stone where it had just been. The rock crunched and crumbled. A piece broke off and fell into the puddle beside it. She accepted the damage without looking at it.

He dropped to one knee again, struck – this time from below, at the thigh, where the supporting muscles are located. The blade bit, penetrated, cut, and came out again.

She stumbled. Only briefly, but it happened. One leg gave way slightly, then regained her balance. She wasn't invincible. She was just tenacious.

That gave him something to hold onto. Not a great glimmer of hope, more like a tiny, dirty spark: you can cut them.

"Well, Mother," he gasped, "feels like shit, doesn't it?"

Her response was a blow that was less aimed than simply a matter of "get out of the way." The hand struck his weapon, not him. The sword was thrown off course, the blow half-stuck in mid-air.

He seized the moment, pushed off, and got back up. His body was a mess from head to toe, but he functioned. His lungs burned, his shoulder vibrated with pain, his legs were heavy as old tree trunks – and yet he did what he was meant to do: stand, punch, stand, punch.

She attacked him again. This time there was less restraint in her movements. He had hurt her, even if it annoyed her more than it seriously damaged her. Now there was more speed, more edge, more poorly concealed hatred.

The next blow landed on his head. The hand came from above, as if it wanted to simply push him into the ground and leave him there. He yanked the sword up, sideways, like a roof. His fingers gripped the hilt until his knuckles ached.

There was a crash.

The impact was like striking a bell with a tree. The vibration shot through the blade into his arms, through his shoulders, and into his teeth. He tasted metal, even though he had nothing in his mouth but the taste of lake and blood.

But the blade held. For now.

She withdrew her hand and looked at him. There was something in her gaze that he recognized: the awareness that his opponent wouldn't break immediately. Men get that look when, after the first blow, they realize the other person isn't going down.

He grinned crookedly. "I've fought tougher hangovers than you," he lied.

She responded by dodging to the left and this time going low. One hand on his leg, one on his hip. If she got him to the ground, it would be over. Not because he couldn't hit anymore—but because she would then drag him to where the water ruled again.

He jumped – or rather, what his body was still capable of. A half-jump backward, a slide, a stumble, a narrow escape. Her fingers caught only air.

He swiped downwards, at her shoulder, trying to give her the same thing she had given him in the hall. The blade struck, slid, slashed, caught on a kind of bony ridge beneath the skin.

She hissed again, this time louder. There was a hint of a voice in it, something that might once have been speech before it drowned in gurgles and bubbles.

The cave around them reacted. Every blow, every step, every impact echoed in the walls. Water dripped, stones crunched, somewhere a helmet rolled a few inches across the floor.

And somewhere in the distance, in the darkness, something seemed to be watching. Not as a form, but as a presence. A lake is always watching.

Beowulf noticed the strength in his arms beginning to weaken. Not gone, but not as strong. The sword felt as if it had become twice as heavy. Every swing required more willpower than muscle. His shoulder was now screaming in full sentences.

She, on the other hand, didn't seem to diminish. Yes, she was bleeding, if you could call it that. There were cracks in her skin, dark fluid dripped, ran, and pooled on the floor. But her breathing remained the same. Long, heavy, ferocious.

He knew he couldn't go on like that forever. Long fights are for younger men and silly songs. There was neither of those down here.

She prepared for her next strike, one of those movements laden with meaning: anger, weight, the past. He saw it coming, saw the trajectory of her hand, knew that if he blocked head-on this time, he might not be able to get up completely.

So he did something he didn't often do: he went with the movement, not against it.

The blow came from the right; he turned to the right with it, letting the hand pass just past him, feeling the air tear. He was beside her now, closer than he wanted. Close enough to smell the stench of her skin, that mixture of lake, old wounds, and something reminiscent of burnt seaweed.

He joined in.

Not in the stomach, not in the chest. He aimed higher. Neck. Whatever it was, something had to be holding her head up.

The blade struck flesh, harder flesh, but flesh nonetheless. It went in quite a way, stopping somewhere where bone or cartilage or some perverse in-between thing was in the way.

She screamed. This time, a real scream. No hiss, no gurgling. A scream that filled the entire cave. It wasn't a human sound, but something about it was still recognizable: loss. Pain. Rage.

The scream shot through his skull, as if someone were tapping on the bones inside. He tried to pull the sword out, but there was resistance. It was stuck. Not completely, but enough.

She grabbed him.

The hand that was still free grasped his upper arm, the good one. The fingers closed around it like iron clamps. He felt something give way, not the bone, but everything around it. It was a grip that said: Now you're staying here.

She pulled. Not him towards her, but herself with him.

Beowulf felt the world move, the ground give way, his feet lose their footing. It hurled him sideways as if he were a piece of wood. He crashed into a pile of armor and bones, landing half on what felt like a ribcage, half on a shield that slid away beneath him.

The sword was gone. Either still in her throat or somewhere in between. His hand was suddenly empty, and that felt worse than the air that had escaped his lungs.

He tried to push himself up, slipped, coughed, felt his body about to simply lie down and let the songs do the rest.

She came closer. You heard it before you actually saw it. That scraping, impatient sound. Breath quickening. Water dripping from her, splashing against the stone, then splashing back up.

He looked around frantically. No sword. Just junk. Old blades, rusty, broken. Spearheads so blunt they could barely cut tough bread. Shields with more holes than wood.

He grabbed something that looked remotely like it might hurt. An old axe blade without a handle, just metal with remnants of wood that had long since rotted away. He gripped it, felt the rust crumble in his hand.

She stood before him now. Tall, wet, breathing, with the sword, his sword, still half in her throat, crooked, like an ugly piece of jewelry. Dark liquid ran down it, dripping onto her chest, leaving streaks.

It looked like an altar that someone had beaten up while drunk.

"Come on," he panted. "One more round won't hurt."

She raised both hands. No more tactics, no more clever twists and turns. Only: crush, tear apart, bring to the ground. Everything inside her screamed for it to end.

Beowulf knew he couldn't keep up like this for long. He was in a worse position than he wanted to admit. Without a sword, with a shoulder that caught fire with every movement, in a cave not built for humans. She had the home advantage, the water advantage, the motherhood advantage.

But he had something she didn't: the deep, repulsive, indestructible will not to be the one they would later say: He simply stayed put.

He ducked as the hands came down. Not far enough to completely escape the blow, but enough to avoid being struck full force on the head. One of the hands grazed his back, tearing his skin and leaving a trail of pain that shot down to his kidneys.

He rolled to the side, the axe blade in front of him.

She followed him, briefly tripped over a helmet, stepped on it, and crushed it. The sound of yielding metal shot through his bones. That's how it would sound if she'd hit him full force.

He came to rest against a larger stone, pushed himself up, the axe blade in front of his chest as if it were a real shield.

She stood, breathed, looked at him, looked at the pathetic thing in his hand. For a moment, there was something in her eyes that was damned close to contempt.

And right there, in that split second between "I've got you" and "I've got you," he knew: This isn't the moment the story ends. Not here, not with this rusty piece of metal.

The thing that would make all the difference – the thing that would give the next chapter its name – was waiting somewhere in this cave.

He just had to stay alive long enough to find it.

The mother from the mire shrugged, her hands rose again, her breathing grew louder. Beowulf gripped the useless axe blade, feeling his fingers refuse to let go, even though his mind knew this was not the tool with which he would write the ending.

And somewhere behind her, half in shadow, half in the shimmering green, the outline of something larger was emerging. Something that glittered, even though it hadn't seen a day in years.

But to achieve that, he first had to endure even more pain. And he knew that the sword he had brought with him was already lost – and the next one wouldn't save him without breaking itself.

Except he didn't know any of that yet. He only knew that the next move would decide the difference between "one more blow" and "the end".

So he took a deep breath, as deep as his burned lungs allowed, felt the cave roaring inside him, and went to meet his mother.

CHAPTER 12 – A Sword That Surrenders Too Late

It was that moment when everything slows down and speeds up at the same time. Time drags like old chewing gum, but your heart races as if it's just learned how to gallop. The mother from the mire stood before him, wet, furious, breathing heavily, her hands raised, ready to crush him like an insect that had landed in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Beowulf held a piece of rusty axe blade in his hand, so useless that even the rust seemed offended.

She approached him, step by step, each step making a sound like someone dragging a wet blanket across stones. Her breathing was a rattling pump that filled the entire cavern, and there was nothing left in her face of that quiet, cold anger. Now it was nothing but raw rage, naked pain with teeth.

Beowulf had no more breath for platitudes. Every breath was an effort, every movement a compromise between "this hurts" and "if you don't do it, nothing will hurt at all." His back burned, his shoulder was a small inferno in itself, his lungs felt as if he had poured lake water into his ribs.

He waited until she was close enough for him to smell her stench again. That mix of wet stone, old flesh, and something that smelled of failed prayers. If a god had ever tried to get rid of her, he had failed miserably.

The blow came from above. Again. She loved that movement. It was the gesture of someone who had already split the world in two more times. Both hands down, enough power to break stone, let alone a half-finished hero.

Beowulf didn't go backward. Backward meant sliding, falling, landing somewhere on bones, and bones rarely offered good support. He went forward, exactly in the direction his hands were coming from. It was one of those idiotic ideas you only come up with when your head has already taken too much of a beating: running towards the blow instead of away from it.

He ducked at the last moment, felt the air above his skull split open. He yanked up the axe blade, not as a block, more like a spike. His hands crashed onto the metal, onto his arms, onto everything. It hurt, but they slipped briefly, lost their perfect grip, and in that tiny, shitty moment, he edged past her, sideways, along her flank, so close her skin scraped against his cheek.

She turned to face him abruptly, surprised that the prey hadn't stayed where the blow had led her. The ground beneath his feet was a nightmare: slime, stone, old remnants, something crunching. Every step could cost him his last bit of stability, but standing still would be even more foolish.

He stumbled on, half-sliding, half-running, away from the point where her hands would soon catch him. The cavern flickered past him, a shimmering, greenish, undulating mixture of rock, pelvis, bone, and debris. And there it was.

At first, he didn't see it as a sword. He only saw the gleam. A different light than that sickly green. A dull, old, heavy metallic sparkle that didn't originate from this cave. It lay on some kind of stone block, almost like an altar, half in shadow, half in the flickering light of the mushrooms. No dirt clung to it. The whole room was a garbage dump, but this thing lay exposed. As if the water had shown it some respect.

He stumbled towards it, while behind him the sound of heavy footsteps grew louder. The mother from the mire had had enough of games. You could feel it in the air. Her patience was gone; all that remained was the urge to break something.

The sword lay there, nestled in a kind of stony hollow. It was large, larger than anything Beowulf had ever held. A two-handed sword, in the language of those who would later speak of it. For ordinary men, the thing would have been an altarpiece, something before which one would, at best, bow one's head in reverence. For him, it was now only one thing: a last resort.

The handle was long, with old but still firm wrapping. The blade was broad, heavy, with carvings that no one down here could decipher anymore. It wasn't a refined weapon. It was a piece of concentrated intent.

“Well, my big guy,” panted Beowulf as he reached out his hand, “you look as if you’ve seen some bad days.”

He gripped the hilt. His fingers closed around it, and he immediately realized this wasn't a sword that could simply be lifted. He had to draw. Not because it was stuck, not like some rock-and-handle fairy tale, but because the damn blade was simply heavy. So heavy that his arm immediately protested.

His shoulder screamed, his back ached, his muscles trembled. Water ran down his sleeves, dripping from every scrap of fabric still clinging to him. Everything was pulling him downwards. The lake wanted him back.

Behind him he heard the next step, closer, heavier. A smacking, wet sound that crept towards his ear.

"Don't die now," he growled to himself. "Not when there's finally something decent up ahead."

He pulled harder. The sword lifted, first slightly, then a little more. The stone it had rested on creaked, as if giving up in frustration. The blade came free, slowly, with the sound of old metal on dry rock.

His mother was close now. Much too close. He felt her presence even before the shadow caught up with him. A weight on his back that had nothing to do with water.

He jerked the blade upwards. It was so heavy that his whole body had to move with it. No elegant swing, no beautiful line, more like "Everything that still has strength, now upwards."

He turned halfway around. And saw her again.

She was taller than she had seemed in the hall. Perhaps because down here she didn't have to contend with a different architectural style. Her shoulders were broad, her body dense and compact, her head tilted above a neck from which her sword still protruded. It wobbled slightly with every movement, as if it were just an annoying splinter.

Her hands rose again. He saw the scars on her forearms, old and new, the furrows in her skin that looked as if the water itself had tried to pull them apart. Her eyes weren't burning, but they were awake. Wide awake.

He had no time to think. There was only one direction this new sword could go in: forward.

He put everything in. Legs, back, remaining shoulder, rage, guilt, Hrothgar's face, Æschere's corpse in the corner, the arm that had hung in the hall, the gurgling of the lake, the cries of the men who would never drink again. Everything that still burned within him and hadn't yet drowned, he poured into that one sweep.

The blade swept through the air. It made no bright sound. No heroic whir. Only a deep, weary hum, like an old man gathering his strength one last time.

She met.

Not where the sword had just been. Not in the neck, although that would have been tempting. The blow went higher. Over the shoulder, diagonally through the base of the neck, across to the other collarbone. A massive, diagonal cut that didn't ask permission.

The blade bit. It went in, deep, deeper than he had thought possible. The skin yielded, the bone beneath it too, but not without resistance. It was like hacking through wet, tough log.

The mother from the mire made a sound that defied language. It was not a scream, not a roar. Rather, a deep, broken belch from a place not made for sound. Something that had endured for too long and now finally snapped.

The blade got stuck briefly. Then it moved on. It severed.

There was this moment when everything wavered. Her body, his posture, the room. The air seemed to stand still for a moment, the water in the puddles stopped trembling. Even the lake above, it seemed, held its breath, just to see how this would all end.

The blow had been dealt.

She swayed. Slowly. Her head dipped, then toppled away, half hanging down, half still attached, as if it couldn't decide whether to stay. A gush of something dark, almost black, ran down her chest, mingled with water, and dripped onto the floor.

Her gaze sought him once more. Just briefly. There was no plea in her eyes, no respect, no "you've won." There was only a final, dull hatred, mixed with a hint of something damn close to grief.

Then something inside her gave way. Her body collapsed in on itself like a building whose supporting beams have been knocked out. She didn't fall hard. More like something the world no longer wants to hold.

The impact was still heavy enough to make the ground vibrate. Puddles splashed, a few bones cracked, and somewhere a helmet rolled a little further. The scream that had escaped her half-severed throat was now just a wet gurgle.

Beowulf stood there, sword still in hand, muscles twitching, breath like fire in his chest. Every fiber of his being screamed: Sit down. Now. Stop.

He stopped. At least for a moment. Just to be sure.

The body jerked, twitched, twitched again. No longer purposeful, just residual movements, reflexes of a system that hadn't yet grasped that the plug had been pulled. The fingers clenched spasmodically, grasping at nothing. The webbing between the toes tensed and then relaxed again.

"Stay down," Beowulf gasped. "Honestly. You're done for."

His head turned one last time, as if to make sure that this really was the man who had mutilated her son. Then his gaze went blank. Not that dramatic "lights out" from the songs. More like, "I don't care about anything else."

It was quiet.

Not really, of course. Water was dripping, his own lungs were working loudly, and somewhere further back another chain was falling from a ledge. But compared to what had just happened, it was silence.

He lowered the sword. Slowly, because nothing else worked. He braced the tip against the ground, then leaned back. Not for too long—if you rely on steel for too long, you forget you still have your legs.

He looked at the lifeless heap of marsh mother. Large, heavy form, now only flesh, which had already found its way into the water. The cut, where the blade had pierced, steamed slightly in the green half-light.

The sword.

He looked at it. It was a monster of a weapon. The blade was now mottled, wet with what had leaked from it. And yet, there was something brazen about the steel. Not a nick in sight, not a crack, as if the blow hadn't bothered it in the slightest.

"Not bad," murmured Beowulf. "You and I would have had fun if I were ten years younger."

He felt a different kind of weariness creeping in. Not the physical kind, he knew that one. A deeper kind. The kind that comes when you realize you've just nearly decapitated someone, but you don't know what you've done with it – except that somewhere upstairs an old man in a hall now has to scream less.

His gaze drifted over to Æschere. He was still lying there, as if waiting for someone to tell him what was what. The bone pendant in Beowulf's doublet pressed against his chest, reminding him that killing wasn't the last item on the list.

He was just about to head towards the dead man when he realized it.

The sword vibrated. Very slightly. A quiet hum, more in the hilt than in the air. As if the steel itself still wanted to speak.

He looked again. The blade seemed… different. Where just moments before slime and dark blood had clung to it, there was now a kind of mist. Not smoke, not normal moisture. Something thin, detaching itself from the metal, crawling into the air, as if the sword itself had been wounded.

Beowulf knew weapons. He had seen them break, dull, rust, and glow. But he had never seen steel behave as if it were alive—and tired.

"Stay with me a little longer, big guy," he murmured. "Don't fall apart now. We're not finished yet."

The blade glowed briefly, as if responding to something not in its language. Then, starting at the edge, it began, very slowly, to write its own end.

Not now. Not this second. But there was something in the steel that said: I have done what I was made to do. The rest is a bonus.

Beowulf sensed that this chapter wasn't over. The mother was finished. The sword had delivered. But the hall above wasn't clear. Æschere still lay where she had thrown him. And the lake above wouldn't simply applaud just because a blade below was making its grand entrance.

He stood between a dead monster, a dead man, and a sword that was already beginning to quietly disintegrate like a hangover in the afternoon. And he knew: he had to hurry, damn it, before even more things gave up too late.

For a while, Beowulf simply stood there, caught between what he had just done and what lay ahead. His mother lay on the ground like a collapsed altar, half head, half torso, half something in between, from which life slowly seeped into the stone. The cave vibrated softly, as if it had been slapped and was now considering whether to strike back.

His hands trembled, not with fear, but more like a machine left running at full throttle for too long. The great sword still stood before him, its point embedded in the rock, its hilt gripped by his clenched fingers. The blade was steaming slightly; in some places, where it had cut through flesh and bone, a fine rim of dark crust had formed.

He forced himself to breathe. In. Out. Each breath tasted of wet rock and old stories no one wanted to tell. The lake had once almost pulled his heart from his chest; now it was pumping again. Crooked, but reliably.

His gaze drifted to Æschere. He was still lying there, askew, a pile of man in the corner, and the cave was acting as if he were nothing more than another item in its garbage collection. That was what disgusted him most: how little the cave cared about any of it.

Beowulf dragged himself toward him. Every step across the uneven ground was a small pact with the pain: one more, then we'll talk. His boots slid over seaweed, crunched against bone, scraped along metal. Once, his vision went black as he strained his injured shoulder on some sharp edge. He stopped, gritted his teeth, and waited until the blurry vision subsided. Then he continued.

Æschere was lighter than Beowulf had expected. Or he was stronger than he felt. Perhaps both. The old man's face was half in shadow, half in greenish light. His eyes were open, but no longer there. Only that empty vastness that the dead have when their bodies realize they are now nothing more than a bed.

"You deserved a more comfortable final destination," murmured Beowulf, kneeling beside him. "A funeral pyre, a few juicy lies about your youth, a king who doesn't fall to pieces when your name is mentioned."

He reached into his doublet and pulled out the small bone pendant Hrothgar had given him. The thing felt colder than anything else down here, even though the air was warm and humid. A small, worn piece of the past that looked like it had seen more hands than was good for it.

“He wanted me to give you fire,” said Beowulf. “Not down here, but up here. Where the air at least pretends to be clean.”

He hesitated. Part of him wanted to place the pendant around the old man's neck, leave it there, throw it into the cavern as if in response: Here, take it, you bastard, and feast on it. Another part knew that Hrothgar would want to hold that bone in his hand when they lit the flames. People need things to let go of. Without mementos, grief is just a vague void.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, putting the pendant back in his pocket. "You'll get to your fire another way up there. I'm not going to drag you completely out of this abyss, but I'll let you know. Promise enough."

He placed his hand on Æschere's forehead, just briefly. The skin was cold, but not as long dead as it felt. That was the bitter truth: some people are more broken than their bodies even years before their last breath. Æschere had probably already mentally checked out a hundred times before his mother had actually taken him.

“We’ll get you flames up there,” said Beowulf. “No more lake. No more caves. Just wood, wind, and a king who needs to pull himself together.”

He straightened up. That hurt, but everything hurt. Pain was background music down here. He turned back to the sword.

The thing still stood there like a monument. Now that the initial adrenaline rush had subsided, he realized just how ridiculously large it really was. Not a sword for long campaigns. Not a sword for cavalry. This was a weapon for precisely these kinds of moments: one swift strike, hoping that no one would be left standing afterward.

He stepped back to the stony "altar" where he had found it. Other metal fragments lay scattered around it, but none had the same luster. Many blades down here looked like their owners: tired, corroded, some already half-buried in the ground. This one was different.

He lifted it up as best he could. The handle lay rough but honest in his hand. No precious ornamentation, no silly inlays, just leather, metal, purpose. He turned it, examining the blade in the shimmering green light. Ancient symbols were carved into the grooves, something between runes and scratches. Perhaps some god had once glanced at it before forgetting more important matters.

"You're not from around here," Beowulf murmured. "You weren't forged in some village shed because someone wanted to sell a new spear."

The blade vibrated slightly once more, just like before, that faint humming through the handle. As if it were saying: Don't bother me now, I've done my part.

His gaze drifted to a dark corner where something larger lay. A shapeless heap for which the word "body" was already an insult. He looked more closely. There was a shoulder line, the beginnings of a chest, a massive remnant of a neck. And there, half in shadow, half in a greenish shimmer: a face he knew.

Grendel.

Or what was left of him. The bastard had apparently dragged himself down here after losing his arm. His body lay there as if thrown down, twisted, ripped open. The wound on his shoulder was a gaping maw of congealed, dark stuff. The expression on his face was frozen shock. His eyes were half-open, as if they still couldn't believe that someone in their world had laid a hand on him.

Beowulf went in. Cautiously, as if the bastard might still jump up. Ridiculous, yes. But anyone who has ever seen things come back that should have stayed put long ago, behaves differently in caves.

"So here you are," he said quietly. "Crawled home like a beaten dog. Without an arm, without pride, with a mother who works herself to death for you."

He thought of Hrothgar, of the men, of Heorot. Of the arm that had hung in the hall, the hole in the wall, the floor covered in blood, the hands that had scrubbed until their fingers were red. It wasn't enough that the mother was dead. They would want to see the bastard. The head. Proof that the thing was no longer lurking in the swamp.

"They want something to gawk at," he murmurs. "A piece of you for their songs. Something to nail to the wall when they think something is scratching at the door again at night."

He raised his sword. It felt as if he held an entire tree in his hand. But the momentum he needed wasn't as great as before. Grendel was down, and Grendel was through.

"This is for me," said Beowulf. "So I don't have to keep explaining why I sleep so badly."

The blow was shorter, harder. The blade sliced through the base of the neck, where too much was already damaged. It cut, tore, and severed. Bones cracked, something crashed, as if old structures were finally giving way. The head came loose, rolled a short distance, and came to rest in a hollow of stone and mud.

Beowulf stood there, sword in hand, beside a headless body and a headless body, next to the king's dead mother and dead companion. It looked like the setting for a very bad mural.

And then he saw the sword begin to give way.

At first, it was just a glimmer at the edge. A kind of melting that didn't look hot. The steel began to change before his eyes. Not dramatically, no liquid streams flowing anywhere. More as if someone were slowly softening the contours.

The blade lost its sharpness, not just in the sense of becoming "dull." The lines became less defined. The metallic sheen gave way in some places to a pale, wan shimmer. A fine mist rose, especially where it had penetrated the flesh and thick tissue of mother and son.

Beowulf held her even tighter. "He, he," he growled. "Don't disappear completely from here, you accursed marvel. I want to take something with me. The king needs something to show for it when he claims to have clever guests."

The blade didn't listen to him. Of course not. Steel has its own rules, especially steel forged probably for divine trouble. But it didn't simply break. It melted from the inside out, as if the cave had decided to reclaim the good material.

The blade remained firmly attached to the handle, where his fingers rested. As if it were doing him one last favor. Slowly, very slowly, the nothingness nibbled away at the blade, piece by piece. First the tip, then the middle section, then the sides. What remained was a truncated, distorted thing, more symbol than weapon. Finally, only the handle remained, with a short piece of metal still attached.

Beowulf looked at what remained. A sword that had chosen its own end. "I understand," he murmured. "If I look at this world long enough, I don't want to last forever either."

He didn't put the handle down. It was now worth more than any entire blade from any village workshop. It was proof that down there in his hell a tool had existed that was big enough to split a nut that had seen too much.

He strapped the sword hilt to his shoulder with a leather strap, where there was still space between the pain and the wound. The weight was laughable compared to what had just been in his hand.

Then he turned back to Grendel's head.

The thing was heavy. Of course it was heavy. No wonder the bastard had always moved so clumsily. Bone, flesh, horn, anything—all too thick, too much. Beowulf reached under the jaw, grabbed, and heaved. Muscles groaned, his damaged shoulder protested immediately, sending small flashes of pain through his body.

"Come on," he hissed. "You've dragged so many of us along, you guilt-eater. Now I'm going to drag you along for a bit. Call it poetic justice."

He managed to lift his head. Halfway. He pulled, dragged, jerked it across the ground. Each jolt produced a disgusting sound, a mixture of grinding bone and squelching mud. Grendel's face slammed against a stone, twisted halfway, and stared at it with one eye that was only half there.

"Stop looking," Beowulf growled. "You've had your chance."

With Grendel's head on one hand, the bitten-off sword hilt on his shoulder, and Æschere in the corner, one question remained: How the hell did he get out of here?

He looked up. Nothing. Just rock, darkness, a few narrow cracks from which water dripped. No nice shaft with a ladder, no welcoming staircase. The way out was the same as the way in: through the stinking lake.

"Shit," he muttered. "If I tell someone up there this, they'll think I'm drunk. And they'd be right."

He took one last look at his mother, lying there like an indigestible lump spat out by the lake. At Æschere, who wouldn't grow old in this cave. At Grendel's headless body. At the metal, the bones, all the filth of past nights.

Then he placed one foot back where the water seeped into the cave. It was as if he were voluntarily stepping back into the same mouth that had almost swallowed him. Only now he held something in his hand that could explain to the world above why it had been worth it.

Air, he thought. Light. Met. Smoke over Herot, but from the hearth, not from the wounds.

And he knew, as the water crept back up his body like a cold memory, that the sword that gave up too late had at least been in time to tell a mother that there are limits.

The rest would become clear once he was back on top. If.

The way out was worse than the way in, because now he knew what awaited him. Just moments before, there had been that small, drunken glimmer of hope: maybe there was a staircase down there after all, maybe he'd wake up somewhere in a cozy room with dry straw and a half-naked fortune teller. Now he knew: down there was only a mother who was no longer there, an old man who would never laugh again, a headless bastard, and a sword hilt pretending it had seen the war.

Beowulf dragged Grendel's head behind him, his fingers digging deep into the tough flesh beneath the jaw. The thing was heavy, like a debt borne for too long. Every meter he dragged it was a reminder of how many other men this skull had survived. He thought of how many times this maw had engulfed human flesh, how many throats, arms, faces had disappeared inside it. It wasn't exactly a relief, but something inside him felt it was fitting that the thing was now being dragged through its own filth.

The water dripping from the cave ceiling found small channels, ran down his neck, and crept under his collar. It was no longer the brutal cold from higher up. Down here, the water was lukewarm, stagnant, as if it had given up trying to clean anything.

He found the spot where he'd fallen in: a narrow crevice in the rock face from which water trickled into the cave in a thin, constant flow. Not a proper gateway, more like a crack in the world. From here, he could go back into the lake.

“You won’t shit on me a second time,” he growled toward the crevice, briefly resting Grendel’s head beside him and grabbing the rock. With his good hand he clung to the rough edges, with the other he continued to hold the skull, because letting go simply wasn’t an option.

The first immersion was worse than before. Not because of the cold – his body had somehow gotten used to that – but because of the knowledge that he would have to go through that layer of dirt, darkness, and pressure again, this time with added weight. And his lungs weren't quite back to normal yet.

He took as deep a breath as he could. His chest felt tight, as if there were tiny hooks on each rib. Then he pushed himself inside.

Water. Everywhere again. It was the same old story every time: the world turns to soup, your eyes to lenses that see nothing but mud, your body to a wet sack refusing to rise. He felt the rock beneath his fingers, used it to pull himself up. His boots searched for footholds, sometimes finding something, sometimes just smooth stone. Grendel's head was a burden, pulling and propelling him at the same time. Sometimes it pressed him down, sometimes it seemed to want to rise briefly.

Her lungs protested earlier than the first time. No wonder. She'd just had her near-death experience, and now she was supposed to go back to work. Every heartbeat, every impulse from her chest said: You're too old for this crap.

The pressure increased. Then it decreased again. He wasn't sure if he was even going in the right direction. Water has no top or bottom once your head is making enough noise.

He didn't pray. He cursed. That was his way of speaking to higher powers: "If you let me die here, you lousy spectator, then I hope you choke on your own mead." It didn't matter who it was addressed to. The important thing was that he spoke. Otherwise, all he would have had was the gurgling in his skull.

At some point, the water felt lighter. Not really, but the pressure changed. He felt his lungs want to make one last, wild upward thrust, to open his mouth wide, to let everything in, no matter what. He resisted. Just a moment. One more.

Then he broke through.

The surface didn't appear as a friendly, shimmering line. It was simply there, suddenly, in the middle of his scream. His head shot out of the water, splashing everywhere; he opened his mouth, sucked in air, too much at once, coughed, gagged, breathed again. The lake clung to him, but at least he wasn't completely submerged in it anymore.

He saw nothing but gray, water, a shoreline somewhere as a muddy strip. Rain started, fine, cold, nasty rain that said: Welcome back, it's shit up here too.

"He's alive!" he heard from somewhere, muffled, as if the voice had penetrated thick fur. "By all my damned ancestors, he's alive!"

Figures on the shore. Shadows that moved. Wulfgar, who had already half-thrown himself into the lake to grab it. Skari, who cursed because the ground gave way beneath him. A Dane, who shouted something that sounded like a prayer, although it looked more like cursing.

Beowulf struggled the last few meters to the shore, the water still tugging at his legs. Grendel's head floated, half-floating, half-pulling him across the surface, until finally hands grasped him—not his skull, but him. They seized him by the arms, the armor, the hair, anywhere, and pulled him onto the muddy edge.

The ground beneath him felt like the softest, best mattress of his life. Wet, cold, covered in dirt—but firm. No more pulling from below, just the roughness of earth and roots. He lay on his back, panting, coughing, spitting, laughing briefly, a hoarse, ragged laugh that sounded more like a bark.

"You look awful," Wulfgar said over him. His beard was dripping with rain, his eyes were glistening, and not just from the water. "But I swear, that's the nicest face I've seen today."

Skari bent down beside him, nudging something closer with his foot. Beowulf turned his head. Grendel's head stared back at him, half in mud, half in water, his jaw crooked, his eyes dull.

"You brought back a souvenir," said Skari. "Very thoughtful. Hrothgar will be pleased. It's not every day you see such a decorative monstrosity for the hall ceiling."

Beowulf grinned crookedly and coughed again. "I thought to myself," he gasped, "if I'm going to drown, it won't be just for pretty eyes."

They helped him up. Getting up was a battle in itself. His legs wouldn't cooperate, his chest wouldn't cooperate, his shoulder screamed as if it had been freshly severed. He cursed, they pulled, he cursed some more. Finally, he stood. Somehow.

The men huddled around Grendel's head. One touched his forehead, as if to check if it was real flesh and not a bad joke. Another spat directly on it. A third unconsciously made the sign to ward off the evil eye.

"That's him," murmured one of the Danes. "By anything that's still breathing. That's him."

“He was bigger than I remembered,” said another.

"He is dead," said Beowulf. "That's the right size."

They laughed – short, harsh, dissonant laughs. It wasn't a joyful laugh. More like a desperate exhalation, like someone trying to put on a dress.

The rain intensified. Small drops, cold, persistent. The lake didn't even flinch. The sky was in its own miserable mood, and it didn't care about anyone down here.

“We have to go back,” said Bragi. “They need to see what he is now. And hear what happened down there. Otherwise, they’ll start making up their own stories. And those are usually worse.”

The three of them grasped Grendel's head. One alone would have been exhausted. Beowulf had the hilt of the broken sword realigned, checking that it was still attached to the strap. It was there, small, inconspicuous. But in his mind, it was bigger than anything lying on the weapon racks above.

The way back to the hall was a march through sticky soil and sticky thoughts. Every step trailed threads of mud and weariness. The wind was against them, not strong, but persistent. It smelled of wet fields, of smoke from distant fires, of the ordinary misery that had nothing to do with monsters.

When Heorot came into view, the hall seemed smaller. Perhaps it was because of the thing they were dragging with them. Grendel's head now hung between them like an ugly sun. Perhaps it was also because you see every place differently when you know what lies beneath it.

Guards stood at the gate, nervous, tired, with that look people have who saw too much yesterday and aren't sure today if they even want the next thing. When they saw the head, their eyes widened. One almost dropped his spear.

"Make way," Wulfgar growled. "The guest has paid his bill."

They carried the head into the hall. Inside it was darker than usual, even though torches were burning. The crack in the wall had been patched up haphazardly with boards and blankets that flapped in the wind. The hole in the floor had been plugged, but it was clear that nothing underneath was properly load-bearing anymore.

Hrothgar sat on his hunting stand, but "sat" was the wrong word. He was hanging in the thing. Like a cloak thrown over a chair back. Wealththeow stood beside him, one hand on his shoulder, her face a single, controlled crack.

As they heaved Grendel's head into the middle of the hall, a sound swept through the room. Not a cheer, not a scream. More like a collective inhalation that no one wanted to release.

Beowulf stepped forward, wet and dirty, his armor caked in mud, his hair plastered to his face. He looked like someone who had had a personal quarrel with the lake – and won, but only just.

He said nothing. He didn't have to. His mind spoke for itself.

Hrothgar stared. For a long time. Too long. Finally, something in his face shifted. Something uncomfortable, a mixture of relief and renewed pain. He slowly stood up, leaned on the armrest, and took a step forward.

"He's dead," he said, more to himself than to the others. "He's really dead."

“She too,” said Beowulf. “Down there. In her hole. She won’t come back. Not for you, not for anyone.”

Wealththeow looked at him. In her eyes was a brief, bright spark – not a smile, not a triumph. More like the kind of relief you feel when the pain doesn't subside, but at least you know where it's headed.

"And Æschere?" she asked quietly.

Beowulf produced the small bone pendant, approached the king, and carefully placed it in his hand. Hrothgar closed his fingers around it as if trying to hold onto a drop of water.

“He’s down there with them,” said Beowulf. “In the cave. With the lake above him and rock on his side. I won’t bring him back up for you. But I saw him. He wasn’t lying there like refuse. More like…” He searched briefly for a word that didn’t sound false. “Like someone she wanted to keep. I took from her the collectible she wanted most. She has lost. He is only peace now.”

The king nodded slowly. Tears welled in his eyes, mingling with the weariness that was already there. It wasn't a pretty picture, but more honest than anything the bards would later make of it.

The men in the hall moved closer, examining Grendel's head as if it were a meteorite. One cautiously touched a tooth, then withdrew his hand in shock, as if the thing were still biting.

"Hang that on the wall," said Wulfgar. "So the wood knows who it will never let through the door again."

“No,” said Beowulf. His voice was tired, but firm. “You don’t hang it above the tables like a trophy. If you hang it at all, you hang it outside. Where the wind blows. Where the crows can see what was running around in the night. Inside, it’s enough if you remember the screams.”

Skari nodded. "We have enough stench in the beams," he said. "We don't need to add another head that will attract flies."

Hrothgar breathed heavily. In his hand, the pendant; before him, the head; around him, the men.

“We will give him fire,” he said quietly. “The old man. And them here…” He looked at Grendel. “…we will give them the wind.”

It was over, everyone said. The monsters were dead. The mother in the lake, the son in the cave and in the mud of the hall. That was the simple version. The one you need at night to be able to sleep.

Beowulf sensed it wasn't that simple. The hilt of the broken sword still vibrated within him, along with the memory of the cave, the water, the moment when he'd thought it would be good to simply disappear. He stood amidst the cheers they were painstakingly trying to build, feeling like a man standing atop a mountain of guilt, a third of which he had already removed.

Mead cups were brought. He was thinner, yes, but they needed something in their hands, something more than air. Hrothgar raised his vessel, his voice shaky but loud enough for the hall to hear. He called Beowulf names that were heavy: savior, liberator, friend. Words that felt like cloaks one wanted to wrap him in, even though he was still wet.

The cup was passed around. They drank. To the dead, to the one who returned, to those who were still there, even though they were already halfway down the hole yesterday.

Beowulf drank too. He felt the alcohol briefly block out the filth inside. Not for long. But long enough for him to hear the hall, the songs the skald laboriously began to sing, the whispered "At last," the murmured "Thank God," the dirty jokes that always come when men have narrowly escaped hell.

He leaned against a remaining post and closed his eyes briefly. The wind whistled through the cracks in the wall, bringing the scent of lake, earth, and rain. From outside.

The monsters were dead. The stories about them had just been born. And somewhere inside him lingered a small, stubborn residue of alcohol from the lake, refusing to be drunk away.

He knew that the real work began afterward: living with what he'd done when no one was shouting anymore. Fame was just another word for a headache. And he was well on his way to getting one.

But that was a question for another night. Now he stood with a cup in his hand in a hall that still creaked, and the men were calling his name because they didn't know what else to call.

And somewhere between the torches and the smoke, between praise, mead and tiredness, that quiet, scratchy feeling began within him that he had won – but was not truly free.

CHAPTER 13 – Beowulf between fame and residual alcohol

The noise returned faster than reason. No sooner had Grendel's head entered the hall and the first mead passed the men's lips than Heorot began to act as if it were the same old hole as before. Torches crackled, voices grew louder, chairs moved, wood creaked, and somewhere the skald was once again trying to find a melody that wouldn't be immediately worth throwing out the window.

Beowulf sat there like a guy who already anticipates his own hangover. The wounds were fresh, his shoulder a fire that bit into every movement, his back covered in bruises and invisible marks. His lungs were irritated and took longer than he would have liked for each breath. But all that was somewhere deep in his body, and up front on the stage, a different drama was unfolding: glory.

Hrothgar had recovered somewhat. His eyes were red, not just from the smoke, but from the night his old friend had been stolen. But now he stood, holding the cup aloft, the bone pendant of Æschere clutched tightly in his other hand, as if he needed to hold on to it to avoid being swallowed again.

“He has freed us!” he cried, his voice that fragile thunder of a man who had screamed far too often. “He didn’t just kill one, but both of them! The one who screamed at us in our sleep for years – and the one who made him!”

The men roared back. Names, words, something between gratitude and drunkenness. The stranger's name, mixed with old gods and new curses. It echoed off the beams, rippled through the cracks of the hastily patched wall, drifted out into the wind, as if to insult the moor itself.

Beowulf raised his cup because that's what you did when a king pointed at you as if you were a miracle. The mead was warm, thin, tasting of what's left over after a hall has seen too much. But it did its job: it laid a light veil over the flickering in his head.

“He came from afar,” Hrothgar continued, “when we thought we were alone with our curse. He went into the water from which none of us ever came up alive. He did what we could no longer do—neither with our old hands nor with our young cowards!”

A few of the young people grimaced, but no one objected. Too much had happened. Once an old king points his finger at you and calls you a coward, you can shout back all you want—it sticks, like a bad smell.

Beowulf heard the word "curse" and thought of the lake, the cave, his mother lying half-headless in her own filth. The curse was just another word for something one didn't want to explain. In his mind, it wasn't all so mystical. There was water, rock, flesh, steel. And decisions. Many bad ones, a few right ones, and in between, every breath negotiated.

The skald was now warmed up. He plucked the harp as if it were a weapon he was finally allowed to use. The first notes were off-key, but loud. He sang of the arm on the ceiling, of the hole in the wall, of the descent into the lake. He scattered runes among the words, runes no one understood, but all loved to hear because they sounded as if it had all been part of a plan.

Beowulf knew better. There had been no plan, just a man too proud to let a stinking lake tell him where to stop.

The men moved closer to him, one after the other, like moths to a flame, only today the light smelled of blood and the sea. They wanted to touch him, pat him on the shoulder, look into his face to see if there really was no one living there who had only dreamed it all.

"I saw her come through the floor," said one whom Beowulf only knew from scrubbing. "I was standing right next to her. You were the only one who moved before I realized I should scream."

"I heard you were down there," said another. "The lake was making noises, brother. Like it was chewing. I thought it was going to eat you up and just spit the helmet back out."

“He wanted to eat me,” said Beowulf, taking another sip. “I figured if I’m going to be in someone’s mouth anyway, I’d rather have a sword in my hand that’s too heavy, to be honest.”

They laughed. Too loudly. Too relieved. The kind of laughter people produce when they don't yet know what else to do. Wit was cheap medicine, but it worked. For a few breaths.

Wealththeow observed the whole thing from the sidelines. She wasn't standing like some queen from the stories the boys loved to hear—not as a decorative statue smiling when the script called for it. She was observing like someone counting every face, every hand, every cup, every crack in the hall.

As the initial cheers subsided, she approached Beowulf. She didn't press a new jug into his hand; she took the old one away before he could refill it.

"You've seen enough for today," she said. "And you've put enough into yourself to keep you inside."

"I'm not drunk yet," he replied.

"You're tired," she said. "Tired is worse. Drunks forget. Tired men remember too clearly."

He looked at her. Her face bore his own shadows. Deep circles under her eyes, a fine line between her eyebrows that had only occasionally been there before. "I thought you were going to celebrate," he murmured.

“They want to,” she said, nodding toward the men. “They must. Otherwise, they’ll break at the very spots where you just ripped the monster out of them. But you…” She studied him as if he were a wound she couldn’t quite assess. “You don’t need glory. You need a place where your hands can hold nothing for a moment—neither sword nor cup.”

"I'm fine," he lied.

She looked into his eyes for a second too long to believe it. "Clear is a word for men who aren't doing anything," she said. "You're not clear. You just haven't broken down yet."

Hrothgar beckoned him, and that was his salvation from further truth. The king comes first, even if he is half-broken.

Beowulf trudged up the last few steps, each one a commentary on his joints. At the top of the high seat, the air smelled less of sweat and more of old decisions. The king looked at him, the pendant in his hand, his head slightly tilted, as if searching in Beowulf's face for the answer to a question no one else could answer.

“I’ve seen many men fight in my life,” Hrothgar began. “Against other men, against hunger, against winter, against themselves. I’ve seen men fall who thought they were immortal. And I’ve seen cowards who later had songs written about them because there was no one left to contradict them. But you…” He shook his head, half amused, half despairing. “You went into what each of us considers the edge of the world. And you came back up.”

Beowulf shrugged his good shoulder. "I haven't signed a contract with the world," he said. "I go where I'm told not to go. And when I come back up, everyone will be surprised. If not, they'd rather talk about themselves anyway."

Hrothgar laughed hoarsely. "You talk like someone who already knows the glory before it comes – and takes it anyway because at least it brings something to drink."

"Fame is like mead," said Beowulf. "Too much of it will eventually make you look ridiculous. But life doesn't taste right without it either."

The king nodded. "I want to thank you," he said. "And I know that no ring, no gold, no horse, and no chain can ever compensate for what you did down there. But I'll try anyway. Not for your sake—for mine. I have to convince myself that something like this can be paid for. Otherwise, all I'll see when I look at men is debt."

He beckoned a servant and had chests brought over that had seen better days. Rings, armfuls of them. Heavy jewelry, crafted by some artisan to make a king shine even brighter while drinking.

Beowulf saw the gold, saw the obsession with which Hrothgar had piled it up. "You are overwhelming me," he said.

“I’m spilling it,” Hrothgar corrected. “But I can’t bear it any other way. You take what I give you, and I can convince myself that I’m not a complete failure.”

Beowulf reached for a ring and turned it between his fingers. The metal was cold, smooth, utterly devoid of memory. "I'll take it," he said. "Not because it's worth it. But because I have men who will drink from it. And maybe some boys who will eventually have it used to repair their armor, when they think they can sleep in a hall that is safe."

The men in the hall watched as gold changed hands, as goblets were raised, as the king showered his savior with praise until it became ridiculous. They saw only part of the story. Fame always has a front: rings, goblets, names. The back is nights spent swallowing water in your dreams.

Later, much later, when the skald had made his third attempt at crafting a halfway decent verse about the cave, Beowulf withdrew from the center of attention. The men were drunk enough to be preoccupied with themselves. The stranger's name was now a hook for song. They would need it for a while yet.

He sat down in a darker corner of the hall, where the smoke lingered beneath the beams and the voices sounded like distant waves. He took the cup with him, but he drank more slowly. Every sip was now a calculated one. One for forgetting, one for enduring, none for pleasure.

His shoulder throbbed. The wounds from the fight crisscrossed him, as if the lake had carved its own runes into his skin. A residue of water still sloshed around inside him, figuratively or literally, it didn't matter. He felt like a wet stone thrown ashore, forced to pretend to be dry.

He thought of home, of the men who had driven here with him. They hadn't seen him when he almost stayed down there. To them, he had simply disappeared and reappeared. A trick. A stunt. Proof.

Fame is nothing more than a misconception that lasts long enough until everyone believes it.

Beowulf leaned the back of his head against the beam and closed his eyes. Before him flickered the image of the cave, the green lights, the mother approaching him, Grendel's head in the mud, the sword vibrating in his hand before he decided to live no longer.

He opened his eyes again. The hall was there. Noise, smoke, voices, mead, flickering light. And somewhere high up in the beams, the smell of old blood lingered, a scent they would never completely erase.

Someone refilled his cup. Skari.

"You're sitting there like a man who's just learned that gods are just drunken craftsmen," he said, slumping down next to him.

"Perhaps they are," Beowulf grumbled.

Skari nodded and took a sip from his own cup. "They're already singing like you're made of gold," he said. "Two more songs, and you'll never have burped, never thrown up, never doubted yourself. Just shone."

Beowulf looked into his cup. The mead reflected nothing, it was just a dark surface. "Let them," he said. "Someone will have to listen to this crap later. I hope I'll be far away by then."

“Or dead,” Skari added. “Then you can’t correct anything anymore. They especially like that.”

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "Between fame and the after-effects of alcohol," he muttered, "lies the very moment when you know they're starting to invent you."

Skari nudged him lightly with his shoulder – the wrong one – and Beowulf gave a short, sharp snarl. "Hurry, huh?"

“Everything hurts,” he said. “But that’s part of it. Otherwise, I’d be one of those people who just talk about how it is.”

The hall sang his name. The goblet in his hand grew lighter, his head heavier. Between him and the lake now lay a mountain of voices, mead, smoke, and gold. But somewhere within it still floated the image of green light, cold water, and a hand that had almost held him down.

Fame was there. So was residual alcohol. And Beowulf knew that both were dangerous – just in different ways.

He drank. Slowly. And waited for the night to simply overwhelm him. Not as a hero. Just as a body that had decided it had experienced enough stories for one day.

The cat didn't come in the morning; it was already sitting at the table the night before. It simply wore a different face. It was the face of the men who laughed because they didn't know what to do with their lingering terror. It was the face of Hrothgar, who drank heavily because otherwise he would have been left with nothing but that bone pendant. It was the face of Beowulf, who eventually realized that the mead no longer numbed him, but only added a new layer of noise to the old one.

The songs got better as the night wore on—at least from the perspective of those still drinking. The skald had found a rhythm that oscillated between truth and falsehood like a drunkard between door and table. Sometimes there were almost honest lines about blood in the lake and bones in the cave, sometimes it was that usual heroic roar: "He leaped down like a star," "He cut the night in two," "He laughed in the face of death."

Beowulf knew he hadn't done any of those things. He had jumped, yes. But more like someone who sees no other option. He hadn't sliced the night in two; he had rather stumbled through it. And he hadn't laughed in Death's face—he had cursed in its mouth. Big difference.

Gold piled up at his side, as if someone had tried to build a metal wall between him and his guilty conscience. Bracelets, heavy chains, a brocade cloak that looked as if it had been made for a thinner man. One of the servants had tried to put the cloak on him, and Beowulf hadn't pushed him away—only because he lacked the strength. Now he sat there, wrapped in fabric that smelled of other people's houses, sweating beneath the blanket of approval.

"You look like a badly dressed statue," commented Skari, who had sat down next to him again. "If you become any quieter, they'll put you on a pedestal and hang prayer slips on your arms."

"Let them," grumbled Beowulf, taking a sip. "Maybe then they'll finally leave me alone without touching me."

"So you don't want that?" Skari made a sweeping gesture towards the hall, as if he were a grumpy bard. "The whole circus? The songs, the gold, the women who look at you as if you could beat the children out of their nightmares?"

Beowulf looked out at the crowd. It was true: women were looking at him. Not like a pretty face—he was too scarred, too tired, too angular for that. More like a tool they wanted nearby, in case the night decided to break through the ground again. Security is sometimes more erotic than beauty.

“Fame is like a bad patchwork quilt,” he said after a while. “From a distance, it looks warm. When you get closer, you see every scar, every stain, every spot where it’s too thin. But everyone acts as if it’s a precious coat because no one wants to admit they’re cold.”

Skari grinned crookedly. "If you keep talking like that, they'll send you back into the sea to drown with the other truths."

Beowulf emptied the cup, set it down, and watched as a servant instinctively refilled it. Reflexes—his, the servant's, those of the hall. It was hard to drink against habit.

Eventually, Unferth crept back into his vicinity. Of course. Guys like him had a knack for reappearing just when you thought they'd learned their lesson. He'd drunk more than was good for him, you could see it in the glassiness in his eyes, but he was still standing like a man used to stumbling.

“You did what none of us did,” he said, with that mixture of admiration and self-loathing that burned in the air. “And I… I just sat there with my knife and my big mouth.”

Beowulf knew how easy it would have been to humiliate the man now. One wrong remark, one nasty comment, and Unferth would once again have been the foolish jester of the hall. The minstrels would have further elevated the stranger by belittling the native once more.

He had no desire for that kind of victory. The lake had shown him how small all men become when things get serious.

“You did something too,” said Beowulf, without irony. “You survived. And you watched.”

Unferth grimaced. "That doesn't sound like much."

“If you watch long enough,” said Beowulf, “you can eventually decide whether to stay seated or move. Some get up, others stay stuck forever. You’re still breathing. That means you haven’t ruined everything yet.”

Skari raised an eyebrow. "That was almost friendly," he murmured. "Be careful, or they might think you're wise."

Unferth slumped against a post, the knife loose in his hand. "They'll be talking about you when you're gone," he said, staring at his mug. "Maybe for years. Maybe for decades. And every time they do, I'll be the one who sat by and did nothing."

“Or,” Beowulf replied, “you will be the one who doesn’t sit down next time.”

"Next time?" Unferth laughed, a thin, brittle sound. "After that..." He gestured toward the lake, which was invisible through any wall, yet still present in the room. "What more could there be?"

Beowulf wasn't thinking about the next battle. He was thinking about what always came after the monsters were gone: humans. Greed. Envy. Boredom. Men who, in times of peace, don't know what to do with their hands. Wars of boredom are often uglier than wars of fear.

"Something always comes along," he said quietly. "Maybe not a dragon, not a beast, not a mother from the mire. But something inside you. Something that doesn't want to sleep at night. If you let that go, it will eat you too. Only more slowly."

Unferth remained silent. That was good. There was no sentence that could make these small inner truths more beautiful.

The night passed them by, slowly, ploddingly, filled with voices that wavered between laughter and hoarse singing. Eventually, they began to unpack old stories: battles of the past, campfires, women in other countries, storms at sea, bets lost before they even understood them.

Beowulf listened to them. Sometimes he laughed along, sometimes he just drank. Again and again he noticed how often the same patterns emerged: A man too proud to admit defeat. A king who realized too late that his wealth was just a thin cloak. One who went berserk when his son returned with a fake face.

“This,” he said to Skari at one point, pointing to the noisy room, “is worse than the cave.”

"Because it's louder?" Skari asked.

“Because nobody realizes we’re down here too,” said Beowulf. “They all think they’re back up above. But we’re still sitting under something that could collapse at any moment.”

Skari nodded slowly. He drank, shrugged, then let his shoulders drop again. "And what are you going to do with that?"

Beowulf looked at his hands. The calluses, the cuts, the scab under his fingernails that wouldn't come off completely. "I'll drink it until I've had enough," he said. "Then I'll go home. Or somewhere where no one shouts my name when they're drinking to bolster their courage."

“Home,” Skari repeated. “What is that?”

Beowulf laughed. "A place where they know you before they make songs about you. And where they still put up with you."

"Sounds like a place that gets boring quickly," said Skari.

“That’s exactly why he’s good,” Beowulf replied.

Wealththeow came by his corner again later. The celebration hadn't softened her. If anything, it had hardened her. She wore that face women wear when they've realized that men aren't going to fix themselves.

"They're getting you drunk," she said. "Tomorrow they'll wake up with a headache and ask you if you've got another miracle up your sleeve."

“All I have is a broken shoulder and the hilt of a sword that no longer exists,” said Beowulf. “Miracles are over.”

“Not for them,” she replied. “They will always want more. More protection, more stories, more reasons to project their cowardice onto your actions. Tonight you are their apology. Tomorrow you are their excuse.”

"And you?" he asked. "What am I to you?"

She thought for a moment. "A man," she said. "Not a god, not a curse-breaker, not a messiah. Someone who went down because he couldn't bear to see the lake grinning. That's enough."

"You don't believe in miracles?"

“I believe in water and in men who disappear into it,” she said. “And occasionally in some who come back up. But I don’t make any of them saints. Saints don’t help with the cleaning up.”

He smiled. "I'll miss you," he said.

"Don't pretend you're leaving tomorrow," she replied. "You'll stay until your back keeps you in bed and your men complain that all you ever talk about is the same lake. And when you do leave, it'll be in the rain. Men like you always leave in bad weather."

The rest of the night was a blur: voices, faces, golden rings, clinking cups, the dull thud of a spear against the ground as someone drifted off in a half-sleep. Eventually, it didn't matter who had said what. Only the feeling remained: he was sitting in the middle of a belly full of people who wanted to celebrate him because they themselves weren't in the water.

The residual alcohol from the lake mingled with that from the mead. It was a strange mixture. Not the usual dull, sleepy feeling, but more of a peculiar state of suspension, where the body felt heavy and the head light – or vice versa.

Beowulf remained seated until the noise subsided into a hum that could be ignored. Only when the first heads landed on tables, when the skald had half fallen asleep in his own instrument, when the wind whistled through the cracks in the hall and the torches grew weary, did he finally lower his cup, close his eyes, and allow himself to lean backward.

Not like a hero who finally finds peace. More like a worker who simply lies down where he is sitting after his shift.

That night, there was no clear line between fame and lingering alcohol. It was all a single, broad strip of fatigue, mead, and the dull knowledge that the story had reached a temporary point – but no end.

He fell asleep with the image of green light behind his eyes. And with a vague, unpleasant feeling that although he was out of the lake, he was far from being out of the water.

Morning didn't come, it crept. At first, there was only this gray something above the beams, groping through the cracks like a timid thief. Then the first heads realized that the night was over and the score was still unpaid. Heorot groaned. Not the hall—the men. Wood creaks when it's old. Men creak when they realize they're still alive.

Beowulf awoke with a taste in his mouth that was hard to describe. A mixture of mead, stale smoke, tooth enamel, and lake. The water had seeped inside him. He couldn't spit it out; it was now a part of him. An unwanted bonus.

He lay half under a table, half on a fur; some comrade had shifted him into a somewhat tolerable position during the night. His back felt as if he'd been dragged on a sled over a scree slope. His shoulder was a single, throbbing knot. Someone had hastily applied new bandages—the fabric smelled of herbs and of the hand that had tried not to hurt.

He opened his eyes. The light was tired. A pale, cold gray seeped through the makeshift crack in the wall. Not a bright day, more like a continuation of the night by other means. The smoke hung low, like someone who had stayed up too late.

Men lay scattered throughout the hall. Some with their mouths open, a string of saliva dangling from their chins; others curled up, their hands still clutching a cup as if it were their last remaining support. A few tried to sleep with dignity, but not a single one succeeded.

Grendel's head was gone. That was the first thing Beowulf noticed. No longer in the middle of the hall, no longer that heavy, ugly center. The spot on the floor was empty, but there was still a smell. A sour remnant of foreign flesh.

He sat up, slowly, cautiously, like someone unsure if all his parts were still cooperating. His ribs protested immediately, his lungs sent that dry pain that said, "Next time, we'll breathe on our own." His skull throbbed, but that was alright. A head that didn't throb after negotiating with a monster and a lake was suspicious.

Wulfgar lay not far away, half-unrolled, half-dressed, his spear within reach, because some habits run deeper than intoxication. His beard was matted, his hair sticking out in all directions. He looked like a pile of kitchen sponges after a slaughter.

"Are you still alive or are you just decoration?" Beowulf asked in a rough voice.

Wulfgar blinked, first slowly, then faster. "If this is the afterlife," he muttered, "then the gods are stingy sons of bitches."

Beowulf straightened up, supporting himself with his good hand. His knee creaked in offense. "Where's the head?"

“Outside,” came another voice. Skari, sitting near one of the supports, knees drawn up, face crumpled, eyes alert. There were always a few who saw more than they could drink. “They got him out just before dawn. Hrothgar didn’t want him lying among the cups any longer. Understandable. He’d watched us drink enough.”

"Where exactly outside?"

“On the post by the slope,” said Skari. “Where the wind can get to it. A few of the old folks took care of it. They hung it up like a warning.”

Beowulf nodded. It felt right. There was already enough stuff inside that stuck to the beams at night.

He stood. With every inch he gained height, his body sent out new lists of complaints. But he got up. A few heads turned toward him, automatically, like the needles of a compass when the field shifts. Some murmured his name, others just something like, "He's standing already."

Hrothgar wasn't in the hunting stand. He sat on a simple bench, lower down, closer to the ground, the bone pendant in his hand. The gold from the evening lay on a table, neatly stacked, like a flimsy alibi. Wealththeow stood nearby, arms folded, eyes alert, tired, but not broken.

Beowulf approached her slowly. Each step through the filth of the night—spilled mead, cold ash, breadcrumbs, vomit in the corner where someone hadn't managed to find peace. Heorot looked worse sober than after Grendel's visit. Monsters leave blood. Humans leave everything.

"You were asleep," Wealtheow said as he approached. No question about it.

“I fainted,” he corrected. “Sleeping sounds like a choice.”

Hrothgar raised his head. Between the wrinkles on his face was a new spot: a hollow in which the name Æschere sat. "You look bad," he observed.

“I look real,” Beowulf replied. “The bad will come later, when the weather gets better.”

The king snorted something that could be passed off as laughter, if one were feeling charitable. "They still talk about you," he said. "Even in their sleep. I hear your name in their snores."

"They should keep the lake in mind," said Beowulf. "It's more important than my name."

Hrothgar's gaze swept across the hall. "The lake is far away," he murmured. "Your name is here. People cling to what is nearer."

Wealththeow took a step closer. "How much longer are you staying?"

Beowulf shrugged his good shoulder. "Until I can look straight ahead again without the room spinning," he said. "Then I'll disappear before your songs turn me into someone I don't know."

Hrothgar gazed at him for a long moment. At the stranger who had come to work a curse with fists and steel, and now stood there like a man who had no desire for monuments. "You could stay," the king said softly. "I have room beside me. More room since they took Æschere from me. You could..." He paused briefly, searching for the right word. "...become a pillar. One to lean upon when the wind blows."

That was the offer that always came in the end. Fame seeks a home. Men like Hrothgar want those who have shed blood for them close by. Not only out of gratitude, but also out of fear.

Beowulf took his time answering. He looked across the hall, over the faces, the wounds, the cracks in the walls. He saw the women cleaning up as if cleaning were a battlefield in itself. The children carefully slipping between the legs. The smoke that never quite cleared.

“I’m not a pillar,” he finally said. “I’m more the guy who comes when the first pillar cracks. If I stay here, I’ll become part of the structure. And if something breaks, I’ll be right in the middle of it and won’t know whether it was me or someone else.”

Hrothgar pressed his lips together. "You speak like someone who keeps running off until one day he no longer knows where to go."

“Perhaps,” Beowulf replied. “But it’s easier to live with your own ghosts when you don’t always have the same planks over your head.”

Wealhtheow nodded slightly. It was clear she understood, even if she didn't like it. "When are you leaving?"

“Not today,” he said. “Today we begin to burn the dead. Your husband, mine. We pretend that flames can be more than warm.”

The rest of the day was work, and work is the most honest form of forgetting. They carried out wood, built the pyres: one for Æschere, neat, dignified, with the king personally adding a few logs, even though his knees creaked. One for those of whom only fragments remained. And somewhere in between, a smaller pile for what they preferred not to name.

The wind was sharp, but not unfriendly. It took the smoke, tore it apart, and carried it across the moor, as if to say to the lake: "They no longer belong to you."

Beowulf stood beside Hrothgar as they placed Æschere upon him. The old warrior looked strangely peaceful, cushioned by words yet to come. The bone pendant rested on his chest, precisely where his heart had once beat faster.

“I promised him he’d get fire,” Beowulf said quietly. “I don’t keep many promises. But this one…”

"This doesn't belong to you alone," Hrothgar interrupted. "He belonged to all of us. You just made sure I didn't have to search for him in the lake."

They lit the fires. It took a while for the flames to catch. Wet wood, humid air, old bones – everything resisted before giving up. In the end, the flames did manage to devour everything. The air smelled of burnt fat, hair, and fabric. A smell you can never completely get rid of, even if you rub yourself with herbs for the next ten years.

The men stood still, for their standards. A few murmured prayers, others only curses that sounded as if they were meant for someone else and had now gotten stuck halfway through.

Beowulf gazed into the fire until his eyes burned. Somewhere in the flickering flames, he thought he saw the lake groaning because something had been taken from it.

"Do you see something?" Skari asked quietly.

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “Wood, meat, smoke.”

"No gods?"

"If they're in there, they should stay quiet," he replied. "I'm fed up with people watching from above."

When the fires were nothing but embers, when there were too few bones left to bear names, they returned to the hall. The wind had cleared their minds, but the emptiness quickly filled with other things.

There was less drinking inside this time. A little mead, yes. You need something warm in your stomach when the air is cold. But no more loud shouting. The songs were quieter, darker. More names, less glamour.

Beowulf felt something within him both calm down and become more restless. That feeling when something is finished – and behind it lie nothing but new things.

That evening, Hrothgar came to him one last time. He was exhausted, but lucid. No mead in his hand, only the bone pendant they had retrieved from the ashes, half charred, half still intact.

“Here,” he said, placing the object in Beowulf’s hand. “Take it. Not as a pledge, not as a reward. Just so that someone who was where it lay may carry it.”

Beowulf closed his fingers around it. The pendant was warm. Not from the fire – from the king's grip.

“I will leave tomorrow,” he said. “With my boat, with my men, with what little courage I have left.”

“You will come back,” Hrothgar said. It didn’t sound like a request, but like a simple, bittersweet conviction.

“Perhaps,” Beowulf replied. “Perhaps not. The world is a big place, and most people make mistakes where I am not.”

Wealththeow stood behind the king, listening to every word. “When you leave,” she said, “don’t leave them too much of yourself here. They’ll take it apart until there’s nothing left but a statue.”

“I’ll leave their heads,” said Beowulf. “That’s all a hall needs.”

The night was quieter than the last. Less mead, less shouting, more murmuring voices, more heavy silence. Beowulf wasn't lying under the table; this time he managed to get onto a bench. His shoulder throbbed, his back protested, but he knew: tomorrow they would let him go. With gifts, with songs, with expectations.

He felt the hilt of the decaying sword against his shoulder, the pendant in his hand, the taste of the lake in his mouth. Between glory and lingering alcohol, he had found a thin line: the point at which you leave before the hall begins to possess you.

He fell asleep with a half-smile and a half-curse on his lips. The hall breathed around him, tired but alive. The lake lay outside, still, as if resting.

Tomorrow was the journey home. Or something that looked like it.

And somewhere far beyond the horizon, the story of a man returning home began quietly – with more gold, more scars, and a head that would not let him rest for a long time to come.

CHAPTER 14 – Homecoming of a battered bastard

The morning they set off smelled of wet wool, cold ash, and a farewell that didn't want to be one. Heorot stood there like a burnt-out boxer who had survived the night but knew full well that the next blows were coming, only from the other side. The men had roughly cleaned the yard, as best as one could when shadows of things still lingered everywhere, things no broom could reach.

Beowulf stood down on the beach, where the sand gave way to that disgusting mixture of mud and seawater. The water was calm, too calm, as if the lake had sent its big brother to eavesdrop discreetly. Waves laped lazily at the horizon, as if bored. The ship waited, its hull dark, the wood salty, the dragon figure on the bow with chipped paint and that ridiculous swagger in its carved mouth.

His men were busy with the usual preparations one always makes before voluntarily boarding a floating wooden box: checking ropes, lashing down barrels, inspecting oars, pretending that none of it would make a difference if the sea decided it wasn't in the mood for humans today. Some were hungover, others had abstained from drinking altogether out of fear and thus only looked more miserable sober.

Skari was already on board, his legs dangling, a rope in his hand that he knotted and untied for no reason, like someone who needs to keep his mind occupied so he doesn't look back. Wulfgar stood beside the ship, his hands on the hull as if checking if the wood was still alive.

Beowulf had tied the hilt of the dead sword around his shoulder, hidden beneath his cloak. The bone pendant lay cool in his palm. Two small, harsh reminders of a cave where there had been too little air and too many things trying to grab him.

Hrothgar came down the slope, slow, heavy steps that threatened to give way. He wore no royal cloak, only a thick robe that made him look more like an old shepherd than a ruler. Wealhtheow was at his side, more upright than he was, as if she had to bear his weight. A few men followed, not as an escort, but rather as a silent backdrop for a moment they would later recount: "I was there when..."

Beowulf walked towards them. His shoulder was better bandaged, but every step reminded him that his bones had suffered too much in the last battle. He walked straight nonetheless, because there is nothing more embarrassing than a hero limping like an old dog when saying goodbye.

“So you’re really leaving,” Hrothgar said as they stood facing each other. It sounded as if he were posing the question to the air rather than to the man in front of him.

“I never stayed forever,” Beowulf replied. “I am the dung that is washed ashore by the storm and goes away again when the tide goes out.”

Hrothgar smiled wearily. "You are more than that," he said. "But I understand. Men like you don't fit at the same table for long. If they sit too long, they start cutting themselves up."

Wealhtheow took a half step forward. In the sunlight—and there was indeed a bit of sunlight, a thin, harsh light more reminiscent of a sick dog than a day—the fine lines on her face were

more visible. She didn't look old, more worn in a good way. Like a rope that still holds, even though it would have gladly snapped long ago.

“You gave us something back,” she said. “Not just the nights without crawling in the attic. You gave them back their courage for a few years.” She gestured to the hall behind her. “This won’t last forever. Nothing lasts forever. But for a while, it’s enough.”

Beowulf nodded. He knew she was right. Courage was like mead: it runs out if you pour it too freely. But for a few years, Heorot was no longer a feeding ground for things from the dark. That was enough for a man who didn't believe the world needed saving.

Hrothgar stepped closer and placed his hands on his shoulders. The gesture was meant to be regal, but the body behind it was weary. "You leave as a friend," he said. "Not as a stranger, not as a hired thug, not as just any name in my halls. As a friend. That means you can return without having to slay a monster first."

"I thought this was the ticket in," Beowulf muttered.

“For most people,” Hrothgar replied. “For you, it’s enough if you can breathe and aren’t ashamed to look at me.”

Beowulf lowered his gaze briefly, not out of shame, but rather to avoid giving the old man too much of his own filth in his face. "I might come," he said. "If my journey doesn't consume me first."

Wealththeow reached for his hand. Not like a lover, more like someone wanting to know if what stood before him was truly made of flesh and not song. "Don't forget that you're a human being," she said softly. "Not a sword. Not a song. Just a human being. If you forget that, they'll destroy you."

"You?" he asked.

“Everyone,” she said simply, and let go of his hand.

The men had prepared the ship to the point where it only needed a little pushing. The water waited; the sea pretended to be less dangerous than the lake, simply because it was larger and more open. Beowulf knew better. Big things are just different kinds of claustrophobia.

His companions carried the last bundles. One brought a heavy sack, its gold clinking with the sound Hrothgar had given him. It rang brazenly bright in the damp air, as if unaware of how much blood it rested upon.

“When you get home and they see what you bring,” said Skari, who was walking beside the sack, “they won’t just like you for the stories.”

"They are not supposed to like me at all," said Beowulf. "They are just supposed to keep their mouths shut when I grow old."

Wulfgar gave a short laugh. "You and old," he mocked. "You already have the face of someone who's seen too much."

“That’s exactly why,” replied Beowulf. “Better they have some reason to keep their mouths shut if all I do later is talk about monsters while they count taxes.”

The farewell wasn't a grand ritual. No mist descending mystically. No sea of lights. Just men clasping hands, sometimes too tightly, as if trying to replace words they couldn't find. A few women standing on the threshold, children in their arms, their eyes filled with respect and relief: It was good he was there. Even better that he's leaving.

Beowulf was the last to board the ship. Not because he wanted to, but because that's how it happened. The men had their places, their roles, their little wooden nooks where they believed they were safe. For him, there was room everywhere. And nowhere.

He turned around once more. Saw Herot on the hillside, gray, tall, with a mended wound in the wall. Saw Hrothgar and Wealtheow as two small figures before this structure of wood and history. Saw smoke rising from the roof, this time from a hearth, not from burning corpses.

He raised his hand. No grand greeting, no heroic gesture. Just this small "I know you're here." Hrothgar raised his arm, slowly, heavily. Wealththeow simply nodded. That was enough.

Then they pushed the boat off the shore. The wood scraped over stones, slid into deeper water. The first strokes of the oars were bumpy, crooked, like a child's first steps. Then they found the rhythm. One of them called out the beat, their shoulders worked, the water left streaks, the sun stayed out.

Heorot shrank, first a hall, then a patch, then nothing. The wind came towards them, salty, with that cold honesty that only the sea possesses. No murky smell, no stagnant lake. Just open space that carries you as readily as it kills you.

Beowulf sat down on the edge, his legs curled up, his back leaning against the side. The ship's movements were familiar to him. He had grown up on such vessels, with the feeling that the world was always one-third water. It almost calmed him. Almost.

There was still something of the lake in his stomach. A shadow, a heaviness. The sea felt different, free, vast. But it reminded him. Water is water. It's never truly on your side.

"Well, hero," said Wulfgar, who sat down next to him and briefly passed the helm to the next person. "Ready to let you celebrate at home?"

“They will celebrate, yes,” said Beowulf. “They will look at me as if I were richer, greater, immortal. They will ask questions that have no answers, questions that will appeal to them. And they will think that now everything is all right. Because somewhere else there are no more monsters.”

"Sounds like a great welcome," grinned Wulfgar.

“Homecoming is always a deception,” Beowulf muttered. “You return home, but the one who arrives is not the same one who left. And those at home are not the same either. Everyone pretends that everything is as it was before. But in the meantime, someone has been tinkering with you in the dark.”

Skari overheard the remark without looking. "You'll enjoy it. A little. At least the first night. Warm bed, dry floor, people who know your name before you tell them how you almost drowned."

Beowulf thought of his "home." The coast, the hills beyond, his king's narrow hall, the men who knew him as the one who had brought stories before. He thought of Huglac, the fat, ponderous king who feared the sea more than his own wife. He thought of glances that would weigh things up: more gold in the hand, more shadows in the eyes.

“I am not a son returning home,” he said. “I am a bastard coming back because he can't breathe outside.”

“Battered,” Skari added. “Don’t forget that word. It suits you. Inside and out.”

Beowulf half-grinned, feeling the waves lift and lower the ship. His body rocked with them, the pain in his shoulder matching the rhythm. Every movement reminded him of the blow in the cave, the dragging in the lake, the moment the sword had passed through his mother's throat.

The men began to talk superficially. About home, about food, about beds, about women they missed or had forgotten. About shoulders that no longer ached from scrubbing, but from the oar. These were conversations that take place everywhere on ships, whether you've just come from a monster raid or just a merchant raid.

Beowulf listened to them and for a moment felt almost normal. A man among men, on a ship, with the wind in his face and salt on his lips. When he briefly closed his eyes, he could forget that the lake had almost torn his lungs out, that he still carried a bit of that darkness within him.

But every time he lowered his eyelids, the green light returned. The cave. The mother's breath. Æschere in the corner. Grendel's head in the mud. The heavy sword that had decided to die.

The homecoming of a battered bastard, he thought. Yes. Exactly that. One who brings more than gold – and leaves behind more than blood.

The ship glided on across the water, towards the land that wanted him back, unaware of what it was taking back.

The days at sea blended together like cheap wine in a bad bowl. Sunrises that looked as if someone with gray fingers had scratched at the edge of the sky, nights when the wind pretended to be more important than it was. The sea remained civilized, no storm, no drama. That's how it is sometimes: when you've been in the belly of hell, the world reveals its boring side afterward, as if offended that you didn't give it its grand entrance.

Beowulf usually sat near the bow, where the water first crashed against the planks. He liked the sound. It was honest. No whispers, no hidden messages, just the dull thump of waves doing their job. His shoulder ached differently every day, sometimes a dull thud, sometimes a sharp pain. The wound on his chest itched, a scratchy reminder that his body was trying to mend all the mess.

The hilt of the dead sword hung from his shoulder beneath his cloak, pressing against his skin with every movement. Sometimes he felt a slight tremor in it; perhaps it was only his own pulse, perhaps the echo of something too great to vanish without a trace. The bone pendant lay heavy in his pocket, as if it were a stone. Hrothgar's guilt, Æschere's memory, his own damned promise, now clinging to him.

Wulfgar talked a lot. Some men become quieter when they've seen too much. Not Wulfgar. He compensated with words.

"Do you remember what the bastard looked like when you chopped off his head?" he asked one evening when the water was black and the sky was the same color.

“Yes,” said Beowulf.

"What did he look like?"

"Like someone who thought he had more time."

Wulfgar laughed briefly. "That's what we all look like when it counts."

Skari often sat by the oars, but when he had a break, he would come forward and dangle his legs over the edge as if he were still a youngster. The wind whipped his hair and tugged at his hood, but he let him.

"Do you know what the worst thing is?" he asked once.

"That mead always runs out too quickly at sea?"

“That too,” said Skari. “But what I meant was: The worst thing is that no one will believe us.”

"What exactly?"

“Everything,” said Skari, making a vague gesture toward the horizon, as if the cave lay somewhere there. “The mother, the cave, the sword that vanishes into thin air. We’ll come home, tell them how you went into the water, how you got out again, how you half-chopped off her head—and they’ll nod, drink, laugh. And in their heads they’ll say: Yes, yes, of course, he slew a monster. That’s how it’s done.”

“Do you want them to weep for us?” asked Beowulf.

"I don't want anything," Skari growled. "I'm just saying: history is always smaller than what's on your back. They cram it all into a few verses, and bam – you're a picture nailed to the wall. I don't want to end up as a footnote in your song."

“Then make sure you make your own mistakes,” said Beowulf. “No one remembers them, and sometimes that’s for the best.”

Sometimes they didn't talk about Grendel at all, not about their mother, not about Heorot. They talked about trifles: about the old fisherman from their home coast who had talked more to fish than to people. About the woman in some port who had half-bitten a drunken

merchant's tongue when he tried to kiss her. About herrings that tasted better than the jokes they had told about them.

Silence in between. Male silence, that heavy, fat thing that settles on a ship like an extra passenger. No one complained. You need space for thoughts, and sometimes they're too ugly for words.

Beowulf thought of his own hall. Not as large as Heorot, not as crowded, not so long defiled. Huglac, his king, sat there, fattened by years of others going away for him. His men only glanced at the lake when they vomited in the courtyard in the morning. No mire, no monsters, just the usual human failings: envy, greed, the fear of becoming obsolete.

He imagined what it would be like to walk through that door again. The air, smelling different—of salty wood, of people less accustomed to terror. The gossip, changing the moment they heard his footsteps. The eyes that would first examine his hands—what did he bring? Gold? Stories? Horrors? All three?

The sea was friendly. That almost irritated him even more. After everything that had happened in the water, he had almost welcomed a storm. Something to set the world right again: You are nothing, you hang by thin planks, and if I want, I can turn you upside down. Instead, only this monotonous surging, as if the sea wanted to lull him into a kind of half-sleep.

After a few days, the home coast appeared. At first just as a dark line, then as a line of rock, sand, and grass. The sky was clearer here, the wind smelled different. No moorland, no strange mixture of smoke, but that familiar, salty, slightly musty scent of seaweed rubbing against stones.

Beowulf felt something tighten inside him as they drew nearer. Homecoming is a test. You walk toward the same stage set, but you're not the same actor who last entered it. And the people behind it aren't exactly the same either. It's a deception, but everyone goes along with it because they don't know what else to do with their lives.

"Well, bastard," said Skari as they rowed the last stretch. "Are you ready to pretend you've just been fishing longer?"

“I’ll go in there,” murmured Beowulf, “give up the head, give up the gold, give them a story they can swallow. We’ll keep the rest. It doesn’t belong to any king.”

"And who does it belong to?"

“To us – and the lake,” said Beowulf.

The ship scraped across the sand, got stuck, and rocked. The men jumped into the water, icy cold, but familiar. They pulled the crate to shore, laughing, cursing, calling out to the people on the hillside. Voices answered, first from far away, then from closer.

They saw them coming: figures, first small, then larger, men with spears, women with cloths, children running too fast because they didn't understand what decency was and what longing was.

Huglac's hall stood as always. Broad, not as tall as Heorot's, with a roof that had seen more wind than was good for it. The smoke rising from the opening was thin—a sign that the king was neither swimming in riches nor in misery. A middle hall for mediocre days.

Huglaf—Huglac, as they called him when they didn't want to hear it—didn't arrive immediately. A king takes his time when ships arrive. He has to assess whether it's worth getting up from his seat to receive them. Instead, the usual curious onlookers came first: old people who wanted to see every return because they weren't sure they'd live to see the next one; and young people who wanted to see if the fame they'd heard about really had a face—or was just a helmet.

"There he is," someone whispered. "Beowulf."

It sounded different than in Heorot. More hesitant. More of a statement than a call. Here he wasn't the savior of a hall, but the one who leaves and returns.

His men unpacked the bags of gold, the rings, the chains. It clinked and glittered in the weak sunlight. Eyes widened, mouths twitched. Gold is gold, no matter how much blood is on it.

Beowulf stood there, his cloak around his shoulders, the hilt of his sword under the fabric, the pendant in his pocket, and waited until Huglac finally deigned to come forward.

He came, of course. Broad, heavy, with that gait of men who've eaten more than they've worked. His beard well-groomed, his eyes shrewd but tired. Not a fool, not a great hero. One of those who've settled somewhere in between.

"You're back," he said, as if it were an accusation.

“The sea spat me out,” Beowulf replied. “And the land had no choice.”

The men laughed, some genuinely, some only because such a scene is meant to be funny. Huglac's lips twitched briefly, a mixture of disapproval and appreciation.

“They say,” he began, and Beowulf knew immediately that this was the part where his story already had a lead-up, “that you slew a monster in the land of the Danes. Two of them. In a lake. And that you came back up.”

Beowulf shrugged his good shoulder. "You're exaggerating. There were three: the cattle that gave birth to it, and the lake itself, which almost kept me."

Huglac's eyes flashed briefly. He liked sentences like that. Half boast, half truth. "And you bring...?"

Wulfgar and two others dragged the sack of gold over, opened it, and let the contents spill onto a blanket. Rings, nuggets, chains. Huglac watched, like a man watching who felt both hunger and mistrust.

“A gift from a king who has lost more blood than gold,” said Beowulf. “Rings so you can put something on your men’s fingers when they’ve been faithful in the wrong way again.”

Murmurs. Huglac stepped closer, picked up a piece, and weighed it in his hand. "You'll give me everything?" he asked.

Beowulf knew what was coming next. The game kings love: testing how much a man can keep. He looked the king straight in the eyes.

“Some of it stays with me,” he said. “For those who were with me. For what we left down there. But this…” He gestured to the pile. “…is more than we drink away in a lifetime. And I don’t like carrying so much weight unless I’m lying in a coffin.”

Huglac nodded slowly. The bastard liked honest, audacious people. They were easier to see through than those who remained silent.

“You left as a bastard,” the king finally said, “and you come back like…” He searched for a word that didn’t weigh too heavily on his lips. “…like someone who has seen more than is good. I take your gold. I take your story. I take your name into my hall. But your head remains yours. Don’t think I’ll carry it for you.”

"That's news to me," murmured Beowulf.

Laughter erupted again. The tension eased somewhat. The return journey was underway. Men began carrying the gold away into the hall where it would later be divided into rings, rewards, and silent bribes. Children tried to sneak the glittering pieces and received light taps on the head.

Beowulf stopped behind all that clutter. He felt the sea's gaze at his back, the hall's before him. He was in between. Battered, yes. A bastard, certainly. But one who had returned.

“Come in,” Huglac finally said, gesturing towards the hall. “Tell me your story. I want to hear what the mead makes of your tale before the skald puts it in my mouth.”

Beowulf nodded. Homecoming. Not with fanfares, not with sacred candles. With wet boots, a weary king, and gold that clinked like a guilty conscience.

He stepped over the threshold. The hall welcomed him like an innkeeper welcomes a regular customer who has been gone too long: with a brief nod, a scrutinizing glance, and the silent offer to sit down and pretend everything was as it used to be.

Except that nothing was the same anymore. Not the country, not the people. Not him.

And somewhere deep inside him, a lake still gurgled softly, having not forgotten how close he had been.

The hall smelled different than Heorot. No trace of moor, no hint of foreign blood. Here it was the old mix of smoke, stale beer, men's skin, sheep fat, a hint of fish, and that musty, underlying smell that develops in any hall where too many winters have passed over the same heads. It was the smell of "That's just how it is."

Beowulf paused in the doorway for a moment to see if the room still remembered him. He hadn't been gone long, judging by the years the beams had accumulated. But it was enough

for everything to have shifted—a stool that wasn't where he remembered it, a sign that had been replaced, a young lad now sitting in a spot where another face had once sat.

Huglac sat heavily on his old, worn seat, which had never been a "throne" but rather a better bench with armrests. He tapped the wood beside him, an invitation without much fanfare. Beowulf didn't go all the way up, but close enough that the king could see him without raising his voice.

The men crowded into the hall as if it were winter, even though a breeze was blowing outside, a breeze that felt better in their bones than the stifling air inside. They wanted to listen. Not because they loved him, not even because they all particularly liked him. They wanted to hear the story so that, for a few hours, their own horizons would be broader than the hill behind the village.

"Sit down," Huglac grumbled. "If you stand, you won't have an excuse later for why your knees are shaking."

They laughed, found seats, leaned against posts, and slumped onto benches. The cups made their first rounds, thin mead, not as lavish as at Hrothgar. Here, they drank not out of gratitude, but out of habit.

The skald of the hall—a thin fellow with overly long fingers, who looked as if a strong cough would split him in two—slid closer to the fire, harp in hand, eyes shining. He loved days like these. When someone returned who had experienced more than the last five winters combined, it smelled of material.

“Tell me,” said Huglac. No long introduction, no speech. Just this short, clear, almost friendly “Tell me.”

Beowulf knew that this was the point at which men begin to make themselves look better in retrospect. Half the heroes are born at precisely such moments: between fire, cup, and ears that want to listen.

He took a sip from the cup, set it down, and looked around. Some eyes were wide, others skeptical, still others already half-drunk.

“They had a hall,” he said. “Bigger than ours, louder than ours, richer than ours. And just as vulnerable as any shack at the edge of the world. At night, someone would come. Again and again. Not one of us, not someone you could just bury. A bastard from the swamp, half human, half something that had been boiled in water for too long.”

He told his story. Not everything. Not a word about the feeling as the lake filled his lungs. Nothing about how his mother's fingers lay on his arm, what that grip looked like up close. He told his story the way a blacksmith describes a weapon, not the way a man describes his nightmares. Enough for the men to see what he had done. Not so much that they would lose their nights.

He spoke of Grendel, of the night in Heorot, of the arm that hung in the hall like a brazen promise. Of the mother who came through the floor, who fetched old Æschere, as if she knew exactly who hurt the king the most. Of the descent, the lake, the cave, the sword that ceased to be a blade scarcely after it had done its duty.

The skald sometimes drew breath, as if he wanted to immediately thrust words upon them. But Huglac only raised his hand slightly now and then, and the singer held his tongue. Now was not the time for verses. Now was reserved for words that had not yet coalesced into song.

When Beowulf spoke of how he slashed through his mother's shoulder, how the sword tore through flesh and something harder than bone, the men unconsciously held their breath. When he described the hilt vibrating in his hand as the blade gave way, one of them slowly shook his head, as if to say, "That's too much. Even for one evening."

"And then?" Huglac asked, once the first parts had been told. "Was it over?"

Beowulf looked into his empty cup, turning it between his fingers. "For those who live there, yes," he said. "The hall has only its own demons again. No more lake creeping through the floor. No more bastard grabbing heads at night. But the water..." He made a small gesture with his hand. "The water forgets nothing."

"You speak of water as if it were a man," growled someone from the background.

“Water is better than a man,” Beowulf replied. “It doesn’t lie. It takes. It gives too seldom. And it doesn’t care whether your name is great or not. That’s more honest than most here will ever be.”

A few laughed, a few pursed their lips. Huglac leaned back, looking at him. "You're different since you left," he observed.

“I’ve been wet since I left,” Beowulf corrected. “That’s all.”

The hall began to ask questions. In an unordered, unpolite manner. Men shouted out in a jumble: "What did it look like?", "Did the lake talk?", "Were you afraid?", "How deep was it?", "What were you thinking when you came back up?"

He didn't answer every question. That was impossible. He brushed some aside with a snide remark. Others he simply left hanging. To the question about fear, he answered with a curt "Yes." That was all that was needed. Anyone who wanted to hear more should try putting their head underwater themselves.

Later, when the initial wave of curiosity subsided and the conversations dispersed into smaller islands of voices, Huglac moved closer to him. The hall was still loud, but no longer focused on one person.

"You could have gone too far," said the king. "You could have let yourself be talked into things. You didn't. Why?"

Beowulf shrugged his unharmed shoulder. "Because then I'd have to contradict my own nightmares," he said. "They don't like it when you rewrite them."

Huglac snorted. "They'll still blow the story out of proportion," he said. "In a few years you'll have slain three dragons, jumped blindly into the lake, and drunk mead while dancing with your mother."

“Let them,” said Beowulf. “If I’m lucky, I’ll be old enough by then that none of this interests me anymore. Or dead enough.”

"You want to die?"

Beowulf laughed hoarsely. "I want to be left in peace," he said. "If that can only be achieved through death, that's a question for later."

The king was silent for a while. "I need men like you," he finally said. "Not every day, not always. But when something comes along that isn't just a normal quarrel. When something bigger than neighborly hatred sweeps through our fields. Will you be there then?"

Beowulf thought of the lake, of Herot, of Hrothgar's face, of Wealtheow's hands, of the hilt of the sword on his shoulder. Of the feeling when a hall cries out your name because it has no other words.

"I'm not leaving you," he said slowly. "I'm just leaving the place where I'm sitting today."

"Sounds like a half yes," said Huglac.

“It’s a full maybe,” replied Beowulf.

They drank to it. Not a big drink, no vow, no oath. Two men, one cup, one evening where they both knew that things rarely stay the way they are.

Later, when the hall was thick with smoke and the conversation had settled into the usual spiel—who owed whom how much, who wanted to sleep with whom, who secretly hated whom—Beowulf retreated to the side. A narrow bench, close to the wall, where the cold crept through the cracks. He liked the cold. It told him the world was still there.

He pulled his cloak aside slightly, feeling for the sword's hilt. Rough wood, smooth metal that remained. No shimmering residue, no vibration. Just weight.

The bone pendant lay in his hand like a small, cautious curse. He turned it between his fingers, seeing the grooves, the dirt in the notches, the darker spots. A piece of an old man who had lain in a stranger's cave because a mother had decided someone had to pay.

Homecoming.

The hall hummed around him. It was a different kind of darkness than in the cave. No green light, no stinking water, no wet walls. But there was still something lurking at the edges of the room: the things people do when there are no more monsters to point at.

He knew he would stay here longer than at Hrothgar. Not out of love. Out of inertia. For the simple reason that his body needed rest before plunging into the next abyss.

He would fight if necessary. He would fight for Huglac if someone from the outside thought they could do whatever they wanted here. He would drink, laugh, swear, sleep, get up, be bored. The life most people considered normal.

Except that there was something inside him that would never go away. A depth. A remnant of mire. A lake that gurgled on calm nights.

The homecoming of a battered bastard, he thought again, as his eyes grew heavy. Yes. That was the right word. One who lost monsters outside and finds others inside.

The hall breathed. Outside, the sea roared steadily, as if to say: "I'm still here, you scoundrel. If you have too much gold and too little fear again, you'll come back."

He fell asleep. Without mead-induced stupor, without much laughter. Simply because his body had had enough. The others continued talking. His story was already circulating around the fire, being passed on in small pieces, shortened, exaggerated, misunderstood.

He was home again. More or less. And the world went on.

He had no idea that this quiet stretch – this tired, relatively peaceful block between the lake and the later fire – would one day look like a fleeting breath of fresh air, just before everything started burning again.

But that was still a long way off. For the moment, he was just a man with a hall at his back, the sea in his ears, and the mire in his chest. And that had to be enough.

CHAPTER 15 – The Kingdom That Tastes of Iron and Fear

The kingdom never smelled of mead, no matter what the skalds later claimed. It smelled of iron. Of the dull metallic hue of chainmail worn too often in the rain, of poorly oiled weapons, of the sweetish whiff of blood that seeped into cracks and crevices and eventually became part of the wood's scent. Everything was iron: in hands, in voices, in the men's teeth as they slept at night, still grinding them in their dreams.

Beowulf realized this when the first signs of daily life settled into his bones like an old dog. Herot was far away, the cave in the lake even farther. What remained was Huglac's farm, a medium-sized group of people trying to pretend they had control over the piece of the world they possessed.

Huglac sat on his throne like a man who had learned to rest on his own weariness. He wasn't the worst king, but he wasn't one of those you'd tell stories about before falling asleep. He could count: boats, men, sacks of grain, enemies. He could drink without falling over. He could speak harsh words without a voice. That was usually enough to keep him king.

Beowulf was the man you called when calculations weren't enough. When suddenly there were too many spears at the border or too many discontented faces in your own court. He was the king's knife in his pocket. You couldn't see him, but you knew he was there, and everyone spoke differently when he was near.

The first few years after Heorot passed him by strangely empty. No giant monsters, no mothers from the mire, no caves where the water was alive. Only military campaigns. These

small, ugly wars in which men die over a boundary stone that only three people have ever even seen.

They rode out, in armor, carrying spears and shields. The air smelled of wet fur and horse sweat, of the dull seriousness of men who knew they weren't out there for fun. The land was hilly, crisscrossed by streams and small woods. No grand, heroic battlefield, just the same dirty spots again and again, where someone had too much to lose.

Beowulf was often at the front. Not because he necessarily wanted to be—but because that's how he operated. In the front row, you're either the one who dies, or the one who decides how the others fall. He had chosen the latter, without ever saying so aloud.

The fights were short, brutal, and always the same. Screams, iron, wood, bone, blood. Men tearing the life out of each other's bodies as if beating carpets. Then that strange stillness afterward. The hush of bees, where you hear only your own breathing and, somewhere far away, a bird taking its time.

It wasn't like being in a cave. No grand, alien rules. Here, the rules were human, and no less cruel for it: He who hesitates first dies. He who lives too long sees too much. He who sees too much drinks too much. He who drinks too much makes mistakes. He who makes mistakes dies. A beautiful wheel, turning again and again.

Beowulf was good at not dying. Not because he was immortal, but because he possessed a certain stubbornness. He marched in lines where others faltered. He held his shield high when others thought they were "through." He struck when the other hadn't yet grasped that the fight was long over.

The others called him "the wall." Not because he was immobile. Rather, because he was the point where things came to a standstill. When the ranks collided and everything went tumultuous, they unconsciously searched for him in the crowd—for the silhouette that said: Here's the front, here's someone else who won't give way.

In the evenings they sat in a smaller hall, far from Huglac's headquarters, somewhere with local princes who felt important as long as the king himself was far enough away. The smoke clung to their hair, the beer tasted different, but the faces were always the same: exhausted, wound up, with that glazed look that says, "I survived today, and I don't know yet if I'm happy about it."

On those nights, Beowulf realized that fear had its own distinct aroma. It didn't just smell of fearful sweat. It smelled of iron that had seen blood for too long. Of leather that never quite dries. Of teeth that grind in sleep.

He was afraid, of course. Only idiots and singers claim they aren't. His fear was a silent beast, lurking somewhere deep inside him, reacting to certain sounds: the slide of a sword in its scabbard, the crack of a branch in the middle of the night, a strange boat on the horizon. The beast never leaped directly at his face, but he could feel it unsheathing its claws.

One evening, after a particularly filthy campaign, they sat in a cramped hall whose beams hung lower than was good. The air was stagnant, as if they were living in a barrel. Skari had a cut on his face that looked as if it had been signed by a grumpy god. Wulfgar held his arm as if it were no longer entirely his own.

“They say we live in a powerful kingdom,” Skari muttered, sipping from a cup as if its contents were poisonous. “They say we’re a rock that others bang their heads against.”

“We are,” said Wulfgar, massaging his wrist. “After all, we’re constantly beating the other guys up before they even think of trying the same thing.”

Beowulf gazed into the flames. The fire crackled, but not joyfully. Rather, it seemed industrious. It had wood to burn. "They say that because they don't see the edges," he remarked. "A kingdom is like an old sword. From afar, it shines. When you get closer, you see the nicks. When you take it in your hand, you realize it's about to break."

“Says the man who’s always at the front,” Skari growled. “If you break, at least they’ll notice early enough.”

“If I break,” Beowulf replied, “everyone who hid behind it will break with me. That is the problem with walls.”

They were silent for a while. Outside, the wind howled around the corners of the hall, mingling with the tinny clatter of poorly hung shields. Somewhere a dog barked, then fell abruptly silent.

"Do you know what I hate most about our kingdom?" Wulfgar asked suddenly.

"That the mead is never enough?"

“It always smells like we’re about to leave again,” said Wulfgar. “You come home, and there’s this metallic smell in the air. You go into the hall, and it’s there. You go into the stable, and it’s there. Even in the beds, with the women, there’s a hint of it. Iron, spear, shield. It’s as if you’re living inside a helmet.”

Beowulf nodded. He knew that feeling. Even in those moments when he pushed up his sleeve and touched a woman, he sometimes felt the imprint of the sword hilt in his palm. As if the steel were saying, "I'm staying here, brother. Even if you try to hold something else."

Over time, he became more than just the man Huglac sent out when things got dangerous. He became a kind of storm warning. When Beowulf left the farmyard, people knew: something was burning somewhere. They didn't know where, they only knew that things had become serious.

The women whispered his name differently than in Heorot. There, he had been the stranger who beat the monsters back into the water. Here, he was their own man, bringing more shadows with every campaign. They looked at him like a knife, something you need but don't leave near children.

Huglac began to summon him more often, not just for battles, but also for those sordid gatherings where old men argued over tracts of land as if they were cups on a table. He left Beowulf standing behind him when he negotiated, letting his shadow fall over cards and heads.

“You don’t have to talk,” Huglac had once said before they received one of those old goat chiefs who wanted to redraw the border. “It’s enough for them to know you’re there. Fear is cheaper than an army.”

Beowulf stood there, arms folded, back against the wall, watching words fly back and forth like arrows. He slowly understood that iron doesn't only taste good on the battlefield. It's also in sentences, in glances, in silence. A kingdom that tastes of iron has fear involuntarily included in its recipe.

Outwardly, everything seemed stable. Boats came and went. Taxes were counted, weapons were forged, feasts were celebrated, songs were sung. The people said, "We are well off. We are strong. We have Beowulf."

Beowulf himself noticed that he was changing. Not just physically—although that changed too. The wounds from Heorot were healing, yes. But they had left marks on him that wouldn't disappear. Now he sometimes stood at night in front of the hall, looking out at the sea, feeling the wind that tasted of salt, but in his mind it smelled of the lake. Of mud. Of green light.

He found himself getting nervous when nothing happened for too long. When weeks passed without alarm, without boat, without messenger, with poorly concealed panic in his eyes. Silence had become unsettling to him. A kingdom without noise felt like the silence before an impact.

“You are restless,” Skari observed one evening as they stood at the edge of the courtyard.

“I am awake,” Beowulf corrected.

“Awake and restless are brothers,” said Skari. “They look alike and do the same stupid things.”

Beowulf looked out over the land. Hills. Fields. Small rivers, seemingly harmless. And somewhere far in the distance, the edge of the world, beyond which they always said lay only sea and stories.

“This kingdom,” he murmured, “tastes of iron and fear. You swallow both without realizing exactly what you’re putting into your body. And at some point, you wonder why your teeth constantly hurt.”

Skari laughed softly. "You sound like an old man," he said.

“I started early,” Beowulf replied.

He didn't know that one day this iron, hanging in the air everywhere, would transform into something else – into a crown, into responsibility, into solitude. Huglac was still king. He was still just the bastard sent out when things got serious.

But nights like these, when he observed the kingdom like an itchy coat worn for too long, were the first harbingers. The land filled him as the lake had filled him: slowly, ambitiously, without haste.

A kingdom that tastes of iron and fear devours its own men from within. Beowulf felt the first bites. And he didn't yet know whether to fight back or simply remain resilient until it had completely consumed him.

The years made no noise as they passed over the kingdom. No drumming, no "Attention, now you're getting older," just that quiet scraping sound when you get up in the morning and realize that some joint has decided to lead a life of its own.

Beowulf noticed it first in the boys. In the faces around him. Suddenly there were these new, smooth faces, with teeth that were far too straight and mouths that were far too quick. Boys who looked at him as if he were living proof that monsters had really existed. And that you could punch them in the face.

They came to him after drills, after campaigns, after long days on the ramparts. “Sir,” they asked, “is it true that you fought the bastard in the lake without armor? Is it true that you breathed in the belly of a cave into which no human being can bring air?”

“No,” Beowulf would sometimes simply say. “I stank, sweated, bled, and cursed. That was all there was to it.”

Their faces fell a little, as if he'd watered down their mead. So he lied a bit after all, gave them something they could use as fabric. "But I did rip his head off, yes," he added. "And I dragged him so far that my back still hurts to this day."

Then they beamed again. Guys that age need pictures, not transcripts.

Huglac took advantage of this. Of course. A king who had such a man in his stable would be an idiot if he didn't put him to work. More and more often, he sent Beowulf not only on campaigns, but also as a mobile symbol.

If there was a gathering somewhere—nobles, demi-nobles, wannabe nobles—and the mood threatened to turn toward "We no longer like your tribute," Huglac would simply have Beowulf standing nearby. Not at the front, not with an announcement. Just against the wall, arms folded, face like a stone grave.

"You are my shadow," Huglac once said to him, half-drunk, as they finished their drinks after a negotiation. "They see you before they perceive you. But they feel you before they decide."

“I am not a shadow,” grumbled Beowulf. “I am more like the spot you see when you stare at the sun for too long.”

“Exactly,” Huglac said with satisfaction. “A reminder that looking too high can hurt.”

The kingdom was no fairytale land. It was a patchwork of peasants, petty princes, feuding families, and far too many swords in far too small a space. Everywhere something was burning: a border dispute, an old blood feud, a wayward son who wanted more than he deserved.

Often they weren't big battles. More like: us with twenty men against those idiots over there with twenty-five. More noise than honor, more dirt than glory. But always iron, always that

sound when metal cuts into flesh. That dull, disgusting "crack-squeak" that you can still hear in your sleep.

Beowulf eventually found himself standing in the mud with people more often than with monsters in the mire. They say you get used to it. You don't. You just function better.

One winter, messengers came from the north. It was a bad winter, with thin snow and frozen ground that crunched like stale bread underfoot. The messengers were thin, the horses even thinner. They brought rumors.

“They are coming,” they said. “The Jutes, the others we pushed to the sea years ago. They are preparing boats, they are talking of revenge. They say Huglac has grown fat and his kingdom weak.”

Huglac listened, brushed some grease from his beard with a gesture, and did what one does in his position: he laughed. But his laughter had this short, too long pause in between.

"Let them come," he said. "We have more iron than they do. And men with names that scare them even in their dreams."

The men looked towards Beowulf. It wasn't planned, but their eyes sought him out, as if he were an extra sign, unconsciously leaned against the door.

At night, when the court was quieter, Huglac and Beowulf sat by the fire. Not a large hall fire, but rather a private, small, close one. The king had loosened his belt, but his belly still pressed against the fabric.

"You know they're right," he finally said.

"Who?"

“Those out there,” Huglac grumbled. “We’ve gotten fat. Not just me. All of us. Too many winters without a proper beating. Too much mead, too little fear. A kingdom rusts from within if it spends too long collecting stories instead of wounds.”

Beowulf poked at the fire with a stick until sparks flew. "We have enough fear," he said. "The amount of iron in the air doesn't lie. They've just forgotten why they were afraid."

Huglac looked at him as if searching for an answer in his face that didn't look so work-like. "When they come," the king asked, "will you be standing at the front?"

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "Where else? The back only smells of cold beer and bad digestion."

"You're joking," said Huglac.

“Yes,” replied Beowulf. “If I don’t, I’ll start making predictions. Nobody likes those.”

The years passed, growing harder, not easier. The land was exhausted. The best fields had already been trampled by too many shoes, hooves, and carts. The cows grew thinner, the pigs louder, the people more thin-skinned.

A kingdom that tastes of iron and fear needs supplies. Gold, land, plunder, new stories. If it doesn't get them, it will begin to devour itself. Huglac wasn't stupid. He knew the limits of his court. So, at some point, he began to look across the sea again, to where richer filth lay.

“Friesland,” he said. “Good pastures. Rich villages. Flat coast. A king who thinks we’ve forgotten him.”

Beowulf felt something inside him tense up at the word. Not from fear. From that dull, weary knowledge: Over there, something will happen again that no one has really thought through.

"You want to drive over," he stated.

“I have to,” said Huglac. “Not because my belly has grown bigger – but because the mouths in the yard are eating more than the fields can provide. If I don’t bring them new prey, they’ll eventually find out that I’m mortal. And that my chair isn’t set in stone.”

“You’re not getting any younger,” said Beowulf.

Huglac gave a short, dry laugh. "That's coming from the man who always looks like he was born at fifty."

“I’m just watching how much we put into the risk account,” Beowulf murmured.

The younger ones were thrilled. Friesland. New land, new plunder, new stories. They polished armor that was already beginning to smell inside, as if someone had been storing things in it. They sharpened swords that had more nicks than edges. They spoke of honor, glory, conquest – all those words that always sound the same, no matter how much filth lies beneath them.

The older men simply nodded. Their eyes held more calculation than enthusiasm. Some had experienced the last major voyage that had gone wrong. Others had enough friends in the ground to know what a "major success" usually meant.

Beowulf stood at the edge of the courtyard, watching the men prepare. He felt that old beast within him—fear, respect, vigilance, all jumbled together—slowly opening its eyes. It had feigned drowsiness during the quiet years. Now it was wide awake.

Skari stepped beside him. His face had become more lined, a few teeth were missing, and one eye wasn't quite as bright as the other. "Well, Mauer," he said, "ready to play breakwater again?"

“I am old enough to know that breakwaters eventually get undermined,” Beowulf replied.

“You’re not old,” said Skari. “You’re just full. Full of things that others don’t experience in two lifetimes. That weighs heavily on your bones.”

“I have a kingdom within me that tastes of iron and fear,” Beowulf murmured. “It doesn’t take years to make you feel old.”

News of Huglac's plan spread, and with it the usual promises: fast travel, precise strike, plenty of prey, little risk. They might as well have been written on wooden tablets, they'd been used so often.

And yet, no one who could resisted. That's how the game works. You know the dice are rigged, but you bet anyway because the alternative is standing in the yard watching others play.

Huglac said nothing official to Beowulf. No "I need you." No "Lead them." It was quieter. More significant. He simply sent a young lad with a belt full of fresh rings that didn't yet smell of blood.

"The king says," stammered the boy, "you should take what you need to keep your men... uh... contained."

Beowulf took the strap, letting the rings slide through his fingers. Cold metal. Emptiness. No history yet within it. He thought of the gold at Hrothgar, of the arm in the hall, of the sword that was no longer there.

“Tell the king,” he grumbled, “that I don’t keep my men in check with iron, but with the hope that we’ll come back more or less alive. The rings are for later. For when we need a reason to still look each other in the eye despite everything.”

The boy nodded, perhaps understanding half of it, and started running.

That evening, Beowulf, Skari, Wulfgar, and a few others sat on an overturned boat at the edge of the courtyard. They watched the sky turn gray. No grand sunset, just the slow bleeding of the day.

“Do you remember what it was like before we swallowed all this shit?” Wulfgar asked.

"Before what?"

"Before everything tasted of iron and fear," Wulfgar said. "Before every damn evening was just the appetizer for the next campaign."

Beowulf pondered. He thought of his youth, of minor battles, of foolish dares, of nights when he had drunkenly urinated into the sea and felt immortal.

“No,” he said. “To be honest: no. Perhaps there was such a time. But it didn’t last long enough to stay in my memory.”

Skari chuckled softly. "Nice," he said. "That means we've arrived where all old men end up: with the realization that the good old days were perhaps just poor memory."

They were silent. The wind blew in from the sea, bringing that salt to their noses, which was at least more honest than anything being negotiated in the halls.

That night, Beowulf slept poorly. Not because of the pain—that had long since receded into the background, to an unfriendly but familiar neighbor. He slept poorly because in his dream he again saw the green light. But it wasn't the Danes' lake. It was something else. A mountain of fire, far away, flickering, breathing. And beneath it, something that moved, large, heavy, ancient.

He woke up drenched in sweat, the taste of iron in his mouth, as if he had licked the blade of his own sword. The courtyard was silent. Only the wind, only the sea, only the muffled snoring of too many men in too few houses.

The kingdom, he thought, staring at the ceiling, tastes of iron and fear. And somewhere back there, beyond Friesland, beyond all this trifles, something else is waiting to devour it all.

But first, there would be Friesland. And Huglac. And the sea.

And Beowulf knew, even if he didn't admit it: Somewhere in all that iron lay the first crack that would later be called King.

The morning they set off for Friesland was one of those when the sky hung so low it felt as if a drunkard had pulled it down in his sleep. Gray, flat, without promise. The wind came off the sea, cutting, salty, biting. It snagged through armor, in folds, under shirts, right on the places men like to think they're tough.

The courtyard was filled with that nervous noise only an impending campaign can generate. Blacksmiths were hammering the last rings into shape, as if one more blow would make all the difference if a spear decided to make contact with your breastbone today. Horses snorted, were held back, even though they weren't about to leave. Women hauled bundles, stuffing bread, cheese, and dried meat into sacks, as if filling the men's pockets so they'd have less room for fear on the way.

Iron was everywhere. In their hands, on their belts, in their eyes. The courtyard sounded as if someone had emptied a sack full of nails and turned them into people.

Huglac was in a good mood, or as good as someone like him can be when there's prey involved. He wore his best armor, which strained against him when he moved too quickly. His belly pressed against the buckles, as if to say: We both know this is too tight, but we're not going to talk about it.

"It will be quick," he told the men who were gathering around the ships. "We'll sail over, we'll strike, we'll take what's rightfully ours, and we'll be back before winter shuts up."

The young men nodded eagerly. Quick, clean, glorious raid – that was the version they wanted to hear. The old men looked at each other, their mouths turning down almost imperceptibly. Nothing is quick and clean when more than twenty swords are involved.

Beowulf stood slightly apart, his armor closed, the fur draped over his shoulders, his helmet under his arm. His shoulder ached whenever he raised his arm too high. The hilt of his dead sword pressed against his back, the pendant in his pocket a cool, small stone. He had only half-slept all night. The image of the flickering mountain of fire had crept through his mind again and again. He didn't know what it was. He only knew that his inner self was busy preparing him for something no one spoke of.

First, there was Friesland.

Skari approached him, holding the helmet askew as if he weren't sure he really wanted to put it on. "You look well," he said. "Like a man who knows this isn't going to be a walk in the park."

“I look like a guy whose lungs were almost stolen by the lake,” Beowulf replied. “Everything else is a bonus.”

"Do you think it will go wrong?"

Beowulf looked out to sea, where the ships already lay in the shallows, their hulls dark, the dragon heads on the prows wide-mouthed. "It always goes wrong," he said. "The only question is, for whom?"

They climbed in. Wood under their boots, that familiar creak that tells you: Either we make it – or we go down together. Men crowded around the oars, others sat on the sides, weapons between their knees. Huglac took the place befitting a king – not at the very back, but also not where the first arrows would land.

The sea was unfriendly. Not a storm, but rough. Waves lifted and dropped the ship as if a bored giant were playing with a toy. The men grew quieter the farther they went from the coast. The land shrank behind them to a strip, then to an idea. Ahead of them, only water and the vague stories of Friesland: rich, soft, rewarding.

“Those over there,” said Wulfgar, who was at the helm, “certainly didn’t expect us to come back.”

“No one expects anyone to come back,” said Beowulf. “Most people think everyone stays where they are until they drop dead. That’s their first mistake.”

When the Frisian coast came into view, it seemed harmless. Flatlands, low hills, a few woods, villages like scattered teeth in a worn-out jaw. No menacing mountain, no black cliffs. Just land that acted as if it would take anyone who landed.

They arrived at dusk. That gray hour when the light doesn't know whether to stay or go. They pulled the ships into a small bay, hidden behind a hill that looked as if someone had placed it there to catch the wind.

The first blow was easy. They almost always are. A village that wasn't prepared. Farmers who thought the wind was all that would blow into their houses today. Dogs that barked at first, then quickly fell silent.

Beowulf led the way down the street, if you could call it that. A cluster of houses, timber, thatched roofs, a few fences more symbolic than functional. A man ran towards him, pitchfork in hand, his face red with panic. Beowulf's sword was faster. The sound of metal cutting through fabric and flesh was the same here as it was back home. It sounds equally awful everywhere.

It wasn't a fight, it was slaughter. Doors were kicked in, screams were cut off abruptly, smoke rose hesitantly, as if ashamed. Women were dragged out, children behind them. One of their own boys threw a torch onto a roof, laughing too loudly.

Beowulf felt nothing. Not because he was tough. Because it was too mechanical. Arm rises, arm falls, someone falls. Iron and fear, both sides the same taste.

Later, when they stood in the middle of the village, the first bags filled with cloth, jewelry, and supplies, Huglac stepped forward, legs wide apart. "So," he shouted. "This is just the beginning. We'll take the coast down. Quickly, hard, before their messengers even know where to run."

The young people roared with laughter. The old people made that half-hearted noise you make when you know that arguing with them is pointless. It was too late for reason. The train was rolling.

The next few days were a repetition with slight variations. A village, a farm, a small patch of land that believed itself insignificant enough to be spared. Everywhere the same: screams, smoke, iron. Beowulf began to see everything in a gray blur. Here a man, there a man, everywhere the same look just before they realize that today is their last morning.

But Friesland wasn't an uninhabited plank of land where you could carve grooves at will. News traveled faster than you'd think when it came to death. Sometime after the third or fourth blow, the atmosphere changed.

They stood on a slightly elevated pasture; cattle had grazed there, now men stood. Their own, in a tight formation, shields laid down, spears in front. In front of them, some distance away, figures were clearing up. Peasants, yes. But not only them. Men with better weapons, with better helmets, with that hungry look you get when you realize: either you fight back—or you'll be the next plume of smoke.

"They gathered faster than expected," said Skari, standing next to Beowulf, his shield half-raised.

“We are not ghosts,” Beowulf grumbled. “Someone is always counting the dead.”

Huglac positioned himself at the front, surprisingly far forward for a man with his belly. He wanted to show that he wasn't just king in halls. That he knew iron from more than just its sound. He threw up his arm, the horn sounded, and then there was just that great, stupid clash, always the same, no matter what country it is.

The ranks collapsed. Shields clashed, spears pierced what stood behind the timber, men roared. The iron screamed louder than their throats.

Beowulf was where he always was: a little way in front of the line, where you either make history or disappear into it. He saw one of his boys take a blow that ripped the shield from his hand, saw the tip of a spear pierce the boy's hip, heard the dull groan. He reacted before his mind had even fully registered what was happening. Blow, thrust, kick. The enemy fell, and so did the boy. Two different directions, same ground.

The Frisians had the advantage of the terrain. The hill was deceptive. The grass concealed small ditches, soft patches, and holes. A misstep would cause the foot to buckle, offering the opposing side everything that mattered for a split second. One second was all it took.

Beowulf slipped once, caught himself, heard the crack of his own knee as if it were saying: One more time like that, and we'll talk differently. He cursed, struck, breathed, struck again. The beast within him was awake, focused, devoid of poetry.

He saw Huglac, a little to his left. The king was in a frenzy, blood had reddened his face. He was hitting hard, really hard. The belly everyone had so often ridiculed seemed to bother him. For a while, he was again the man he might once have been, before sitting had shaped him.

Then it happened. It always happens "suddenly," and yet it's the sum of a hundred little stupid things.

Their own ranks parted slightly; someone had fallen somewhere, someone had retreated. A gap. On the other side, someone saw this gap, almost smelled it. Three or four of them charged right into it. No grand plan, just that instinct that says: There.

Huglac suddenly found himself too far out. One step in front of the line, two steps too far from his men. A spear struck his shield, tearing it aside. A second penetrated deep into his thigh. The king roared, struck back, hitting someone in the shoulder, but the third spear was already there.

Beowulf saw it out of the corner of his eye. That tilting, that brief, ugly wobble of a body that had realized it was overwhelmed. He wanted to go there, of course. Tension his legs, push through the men, shove, thrust.

The battle had other plans. Two men collapsed before him, one of his own and a stranger who was still trying to disembowel him. He had to sort that out before he could even take another step. Iron has no patience for royal troubles.

By the time he'd fought his way through, Huglac was already down. A tangled mess of armor, flesh, and dirt. Three spears were sticking out of him, a fourth had probably pierced his side. The blood was no longer gushing, it was just trickling out.

Beowulf roared. Not with words. More like someone who's just had their last chance at a halfway decent future vomited at his feet. He lunged at those standing around the king, becoming what the younger generation believed him to be: a piece of raging iron in a man's cloak.

He struck without counting. Blade, shield edge, fist. One fell, then another, a third. The others actually retreated, not out of respect, but out of that simple reflex: when things get this wild, you take a step back.

He knelt beside Huglac. The king just barely regained his senses enough to recognize that it was Beowulf. A brief flicker of recognition in his eyes. No pathos, no grand final speech.

"That was stupid," Huglac muttered, blood on his mouth.

“Yes,” said Beowulf.

"Watch out..." Huglac's hand searched briefly for something—an arm, a handle, a support. It found Beowulf's forearm and squeezed weakly. "...that she..." The rest was lost in a rattling sound everyone had heard before. No great death scream. Just the slow draining away of a body that had had enough.

Beowulf would have liked to say something. "I'll watch over them," or "I'll make a good king," or any other phrase bards would later want in their repertoire. Nothing came. Only his own breath, hard, dirty, with a metallic taste.

The Frisians came again. Of course. The battle doesn't care if someone who wore a few more rings is dying.

"Back!" roared Beowulf, jumping to his feet and standing over Huglac's body. "Back to the line!"

A few heard him. They were tossed about in this chaos that most mistake for war. He saw Skari, bleeding but on his feet, saw Wulfgar, already limping but still fighting. They began to retreat, slowly, step by step, with those hard little movements where you parry more than attack.

The battle was lost. You could tell. Not suddenly, but as a creeping realization: We're too far in, we've left too many behind, and the others are now angrier than afraid. It's time to leave before the sea closes in too.

Beowulf covered the retreat. It sounded noble, but felt like dirt. He paused briefly, turned around, and struck back, just enough to keep his backs clear. When they were halfway down the hill, he could no longer see the king. Huglac lay up there, amid grass, blood, and spears, and the land, which tasted of iron and fear, had lost another tooth.

They reached the ships not as an organized group, but as a motley crew of men who still had enough legs to run. The waves on the beach were suddenly louder, as if they had taken pleasure in the panic.

They jumped into the water, pulled boats, threw themselves in, and pushed off. Arrows flew after them; a few hit wood, one struck a man in the back, who fell into the water without a word and remained there. It wasn't a heroic escape. It was running away. Without a veil.

As the coastline receded, the ship fell silent. No jokes, no laughter, no "Next time we'll know better." Only heavy breathing, the creaking of the planks, the sound of drops falling from armor onto the deck. A silence that seemed to be waiting for something.

Beowulf sat at the edge, gazing back. Somewhere in the distance lay Huglac, king of a land that had considered itself invulnerable. Now he was nothing more than a corpse in a field, one that no one could afford to collect.

Skari sat down next to him. His face was gray, blood clung to his temple. "We'll just leave him here," he said. It wasn't an accusation, more a sentence that startled even himself.

"The country has him now," said Beowulf. "That's more than some get."

"And us?"

Beowulf looked ahead, toward where his shore lay somewhere. "We bring them the news that the iron they love so much can even cut through the skin of kings," he said. "And we bring ourselves with us. That will frighten them. Perhaps more than necessary."

The kingdom, which tasted of iron and fear, would now gain a new ingredient: emptiness. A hole where a fat man had sat, a man who at least knew how to count. And somewhere in that hole, a name would haunt the place, a name that hadn't been broken during the retreat.

Beowulf knew, even before the first gull's cry broke the oppressive silence: when they docked, they would look for someone to hide behind. Some bastard who had seen more monsters than humans.

The iron in the air had thickened. So had the fear. And somewhere within it, the weight of something that would later be called "Crown" slowly began to test its bones from within.

CHAPTER 16 – Crown, Bottle Caps and Cold Nights

The journey back was like a hangover on water. No one spoke of Friesland. The coast lay behind them, like a debt they could never repay. Ahead, their homeland, somewhere over there in the gray; behind, the king, a speck on a nameless meadow. In between, a group of men who looked as if their spines had been half-pulled out and forgotten to be put back in.

Beowulf sat on the edge of the boat, his gaze forward, but in truth, he was looking inward. Each stroke of the oars was a rhythm to which his thoughts marched. Huglac, lying there, his belly slashed open, his eyes with that brief, surprised look men have when they realize their bodies are leaving without them. The Frisians, who hadn't stabbed heroically, but simply efficiently. No fiery final battle, no divine intervention. Just bad luck, a gap, a spear.

"We shouldn't have taken him with us," Wulfgar muttered at some point. His voice was rough from shouting, from the cold, from what he couldn't get off his chest.

“We should all have stayed home,” Skari growled. “But then we would have other problems now. Debt, hunger, boredom. As it is, we only have one big problem: no king.”

Beowulf said nothing. Words were like arrows—whoever shot them had to aim. And he didn't yet know at whom or what. He let his hands disappear into the folds of his cloak, felt the sword hilt against his back, the bone pendant in his pocket. Two reminders of other kings, other mistakes.

When the home shore came into view, they were all silent. No shouts of victory, no "We're back!" Just that silent sigh of relief when you realize the ground is getting closer again. The sea hadn't taken them this time. It had only kept someone it shouldn't have.

There were people standing on the beach. Of course there were people. When ships return too early or too late, or with the wrong noise, there are always people there. Women, old men, children, a few who pretended they were just there by chance. They saw the boats, saw the faces, saw the gaps. The air felt a touch heavier.

No one asked aloud. Everyone knew that you don't discuss such things in the sand. You don't carry bad news in the foam, but into the hall. There, where it hangs like smoke under the ceiling.

They pulled the ships ashore. One of the younger ones simply collapsed, his hands still on the hull. No arrow in his back, no spear in his side, just exhaustion. Wulfgar grabbed him by the collar, pulled him up, and growled something about "dying later" in his ear. The boy nodded, though he certainly hadn't understood a word.

Beowulf went ahead. Not because he wanted to, but because the group automatically fell in behind him. A reflex. When no one knows what to do with their feet, they follow the one who wobbles the least.

The path to the hall seemed endless. The village was quieter than usual. No half-drunk shouts, no children yelling. Doors stood ajar, eyes peering through cracks. The rumors had been faster than their boats. Always like that. Fear travels in the mind.

The hall waited. It stood there as always: roof, smoke hole, dark beams, but today it looked like a maw. And it would be fed, everyone knew that. With words, with truth, with lies, with a mixture of everything.

Inside it was brighter than outside, but not friendlier. The fire was burning, the benches were occupied, but not comfortably. Men sat there as if they'd already been dealt a blow they couldn't name. The hunting stand was empty. That hurt more than anything else. A chair with nothing leaning against it has something obscene about it.

Beowulf remained standing at the bottom, in the middle of the hall. His men lined up to the side, the sea still in their hair, blood still in the folds of their skin. A few looked down, others stared at the wall, where shields hung that had long since ceased to hold anything.

The murmuring died down on its own. Silence is an animal that doesn't need to be summoned. It comes when it smells blood.

An older man, one of the advisors, stepped forward. The kind of man who wears the years like rings on his face. Furrows, deep eyes, hands that had never struck a blow themselves, but had shown much. "Where is the king?" he asked. No pleasantries.

Beowulf raised his head. "That's where you find kings when they think they're invulnerable," he said. "Dead in a field that isn't theirs."

The words hung in the air like smoke. One of them laughed briefly, hysterically, then stopped immediately.

"How?" asked the old man, but one could hear that he already suspected the answer.

“As we all fall,” said Beowulf. “One step too far, one gap too wide, three spears too many. He fought. Not badly. Just believed in his own invincibility for too long.”

A murmur. Someone cursed softly. A woman in the back row let out a short, high-pitched noise that immediately disappeared into her clothing.

A younger man, red-faced, with overly taut shoulders, jumped up. "Why didn't you pull him out?" he shouted. "You're the great hero who swims in the lake with monsters! Why did you leave him to die on the hill?"

The hall held its breath. There it was, the sentence that always had to come.

Beowulf looked at the boy long enough that the boy's courage began to crumble. Then he said calmly, "Because I was busy making sure you could shout here today."

That hit home. A few nodded. Others grimaced, because they would have preferred to remain angrier.

The old man raised his hand, calming the waves that hadn't even properly risen yet. "Enough," he said. "The question remains: What now?"

The hall had been waiting for this sentence. Ever since they had seen Beowulf return without his king, ever since they had realized that no one was sitting in the high seat, this sentence had been hanging in the air. What now?

There were names that could theoretically have been put in the chair. A few relatives, some half-brothers, cousins, men with a spark of Huglac blood in their veins. Names that were important in family tree histories, but had never actually surfaced in the mud.

The men's gazes wandered. At first uncertainly, then more purposefully. One after the other, they glided over the rows until they lingered where they inevitably had to linger.

With him.

Beowulf sensed it before he saw it. That weight of attention, heavier than any armor. He hated it. He knew it. Heorot had looked at him that way. The Hall of the Danes had looked at him that way. Back then, it was about a monster in the lake. Now it was about something stickier. A kingdom that needed someone it could hate, if necessary, when things went wrong.

The old man turned to him. “You came back,” he said. “With the men who could still stand. You weren’t the first to run. You held the line until it couldn’t be held any longer. And you…” He made a small, resigned gesture. “…you’re simply the one everyone sees when they look ahead.”

“I am not next in line,” said Beowulf.

"Blood has just given us a fat man who's lying dead in Friesland," the old man replied. "Blood is overrated."

Murmurs, some agreeing, some hesitant, some suspicious.

Another man stood up, one of Huglac's more distant relatives, who always looked as if he were about to explain why something was rightfully his. "There are lines," he said. "Rows. Order."

"Order is a joke as long as the sea has no names," Skari growled from the side. "You want to sit up high? There's a horse out there. Ride to Friesland and get the chair back yourself."

Laughter, bitter but genuine. The relative sat down again, more out of calculation than insight. He wasn't prepared to put his foot in it for his claim. None of these family tree enthusiasts were.

The old man looked at Beowulf once more. "No one can force you," he said. "But if you don't take the chair, someone with less iron in their stomach will. And we both know how that ends."

Beowulf felt something inside him recoil. Crown. A word like a bad joke in his mind. All his life he had fought against things that were either too big, too strange, or too stupid. Now he was supposed to sit in a place where, above all, one has to sit. Wait, decide, watch others fall for you.

He thought of Huglac, of his greasy fingers, of the way the king had counted, the way he had laughed, the way he had drunk, the way he had sat by the fire as if it were his right. He thought of Hrothgar, of his broken eyes, of Wealththeow, of the lake, of his mother.

Crown, bottle cap, and cold nights, he thought. The chair, the mug, and the hours in between. That's all there is to it.

“If I sit down there,” he said slowly, “it’s not as a saint, not as God, not as masturbation material for your songs. I sit there as the bastard that I am. Someone who has seen more shit than he can ever put into words. Someone who knows that a king isn’t immortal just because he sits on wood.”

"And?" asked the old man.

"And I need something to drink," Beowulf added.

It triggered something in the hall. Laughter, rough, exasperated, but relieved. The joke was cheap, but it worked, like a cheap schnapps that still warms you up.

A cup was handed out, naturally the good one that usually stood at Huglac's. Heavy, ornate, with carvings that some ancestors had deemed important. Beowulf took it. It was cold. No mead in it yet, no story attached to it.

"Then drink," said the old man. "And when you're finished, go upstairs."

Beowulf raised his cup and looked out at the crowd. Men waiting for something. Women who knew that what was about to happen would creep right into their kitchens, their beds, and their children's cradles. A king is never just king of men. He is king of everything that cries out for it.

He drank. The mead was stronger than the one in Heorot, less diluted, harsher. It burned in his throat, leaving a trail in his stomach, like a small, honest fire.

Then he put the cup down.

And went up the steps.

Every step was louder than the Battle of Friesland. Wood beneath his boots, the hall held its breath, as if to see if he might turn back along the way.

Reaching the top, he turned around briefly. He saw the bodies, the faces, the armor, the weariness, the expected, the unexpected. A bunch of people in a wooden structure, somewhere on the edge of a sea that didn't give a damn who was king today.

He sat down.

The seat was warm. Huglac's residual heat lingered within it, or perhaps it was just his imagination. The backrest creaked softly. He felt the wood against his back, the weight of the stares from the front, the cold air on his neck.

He didn't have a crown on his head yet. Nor did he need one. His eyes were the crown. His expectations. His fear. The thought that he now needed someone to blame.

Beowulf placed his hands on the armrests. They were smooth from years of others holding onto them. He laid his fingers over them, as if testing whether it was all real.

"Good," he said, his voice not loud, but clear enough. "Then let's begin."

The hall breathed again. Some were relieved, some disappointed, some with that flickering spark in their eyes that says: Let's see how long this lasts.

And Beowulf knew, even before the first advisor opened his mouth to talk about tributes, borders, and retribution: The monsters weren't gone. They had simply taken on different forms.

At night, when the hall was empty, he would sit in that spot, a cup in his hand, the day's bottle caps in his bones, and the cold in his chest that only kings truly know: the cold of knowing that everyone will point the finger at you when the next shit hits the court.

But that was only the first night. The night the bastard sat down on the chair and the hall pretended it now had a center again.

Outside, the wind whistled. It sounded like someone laughing.

The first few days in the chair were worse than any fight. Not because anyone tried to slit his throat. But because no one did. That was the unsettling thing: everyone carried on as if nothing had happened – except that suddenly all sentences were bent in his direction, like smoke searching for the same beam.

In the mornings, the farmyard was the same as before: pigs grunted as if it were contractually agreed that they had to comment on the day, chickens ran about in confusion, children screamed, women hauled water, wood, children—everything in a jumble. But when he came outside, when he went down the steps, the noise became a touch quieter. Just a whisper—but it was enough.

“Sir,” they said now. The same word as before, but with a different meaning. Before, he had been the man you called “Sir” when you wanted him to help you die—or survive. Now it was the “Sir” they used when they didn’t know what else to do with their anger.

The advisors seemed to him like bad pieces of furniture: too much, too heavy, difficult to move. They had gathered around Huglac like moths to a candle, and now they were flying

around him, irritated, but ready to do the same dance again. Only this time with a different focal point.

There was the old man with the deep furrows in his face, who had more or less pushed the chair toward him. He wasn't stupid. He knew that you needed someone the men knew if you didn't want to end up in the middle of a family feud. His name was Eadgils, but everyone called him "the Grey One." He spoke softly, but in sentences that drove like nails into a table.

“You have to decide,” the Grey Man said on the second day, as they sat in the small room behind the hall, at a table that had seen far too many plans. “We can’t pretend Friesland didn’t happen. The Frisians will remember us. And so will your own people.”

“Decide,” Beowulf repeated, taking a sip from the cup. The mead was thicker than usual, as if someone had poured in honey to drown reality. “Very well. Then I decide we must first fill our own holes before trampling other people’s fields again.”

"They will want revenge," replied the Grey Man.

"They always want something," said Beowulf. "Gold, revenge, women, better fields, less rain, more fish, less fear. If I listen to everything, I'll just sit here nodding my neck off."

The Grey Man looked at him for a while. "You are not a good king for liars," he said.

“But a useful one for people who have to get up in the morning,” Beowulf replied.

Outside, the usual misery continued: A man came because his neighbor had stolen his cattle. The neighbor swore he had only "accidentally" let the cattle wander into his barn. A boy had hit another on the head with a stone, and now his mother was demanding blood money. A woman complained that her husband drank too much, another complained that his son didn't fight enough. The same old drama as before any crown. Only now Beowulf was sitting on top when they started spitting into each other's bowls.

After the first three days, it wasn't his arm that hurt, nor his back, nor the old wound in his shoulder – it was his head. Not from the beatings. From listening. From the realization that being a king has less to do with heroism than with patience.

The nights grew colder. Not because winter was coming—though that too, of course—but because the chair lingered in the heat. When the hall was empty, when the noise had subsided, he sometimes sat there alone, with a mug in his hand and the feeling that the air was staring back at him.

A crown and a bottle cap, he thought. Both will end up stuck on your head if you're unlucky. One shines, the other doesn't. But both press down.

He drank more than before. Not because he was thirstier. Because his head was louder. During the day, it was the voices of people; in the evening, the voices of memories. The lake called out, Heorot, Hrothgar, Huglac on the hill, the moment he sat down in the chair.

Skari saw that, of course. Some people go blind with age, but not Skari. He had an eye for the flaws in people.

“You drink like someone trying to wash down the crown,” he said one evening as they sat in the corner of the hall, slightly off to the side.

“If I flush it down,” said Beowulf, “it will be lying in my own vomit tomorrow. That’s not a solution either.”

"You could drink less," Skari suggested.

"You could breathe less," Beowulf countered. "Both are about equally realistic."

Despite the jokes, he was careful. He knew men who had sought the king in the cup and ended up being nothing more than a source of laughter for others. He didn't want to be the most drunk man in the room. Just the one who drank enough not to fly off the handle at the slightest thing.

The cold nights crept in. It began with the furs no longer keeping him warm, even when piled close together. The wind found every crack in the walls, crept under his coat, and seeped into his bones. He could light as many fires as he liked—the cold wasn't just in the wood. It was in his responsibility.

He noticed it in his dreams. Before, they were about beatings, monsters, water. Now other images were added. People staring at him as he sat in the chair, their eyes empty, their mouths open as if they wanted to devour him. Children standing in burning villages, shouting "King!" without saying whether they meant him or what they had heard about him.

He woke with a dry throat, even though he had drunk enough. Sometimes he would go outside, barefoot into the courtyard, his coat only half-draped over his shoulders. The cold at least made something clear. The ground was hard, the sky black, the sea in the distance just a sound.

"You're getting sick," Wulfgar once said when he found him outside at night.

“I already am,” said Beowulf. “Just not at my feet.”

He didn't laugh. It wasn't a joke. It was a diagnosis.

During the day, they worked to fill the void Huglac had left behind. Not just politically. Practically. A king consumes a lot—cheese, meat, mead, attention. When he's gone, suddenly too much of it hangs in the air.

Several minor princes tested the edges. Where the kingdom was thin, it was crumbling. One had stopped sending tribute, another had suddenly "forgotten" to provide men to man the wall.

"They are testing you," said the Grey One.

“Let them,” said Beowulf. “I have hands too.”

He went there. Not with an army. With a small troop, just enough so that one could say: "The king is not coming alone, but he is not weighing himself down with too much weight either."

He stood in the halls of these little people who felt big, looked into their eyes, listened as they stuttered, explained, and talked things out: bad harvest, sick men, an unhappy winter.

“I was in Friesland,” he once said to one of them, a man with limp hands and sharp eyes. “I saw what it looks like when a king forgets he can die. Don’t make the same mistake, but do it more cheaply.”

The man lowered his gaze and muttered something about "of course, sir." The taxes were coming again.

This went on for a while: plugging holes, checking edges, extinguishing small fires before they grew big. It was work, not a heroic deed. It was like weeding a garden you don't even enjoy sitting in yourself.

At night he sat again with the cup on the chair or at its edge. Sometimes he just stared into the fire. Sometimes he talked to people who weren't there: Hrothgar, Huglac, Æschere, the lake, the dragon from the dream.

"If you know anything, say it," he muttered into the void once. "I'm sitting here pretending I have a plan. The truth is, I'm holding this place together until someone comes along and pulls it out from under me. Or until something falls from the sky and sets everything on fire."

Skari overheard this by chance. He had become quieter over the years, in the way men become quieter after seeing too often that loud statements change nothing.

"You are talking to the dead," he said.

“They do not disagree,” Beowulf replied.

"They won't help you either."

"Not always the living either," he grumbled.

There were evenings when the hall was full, the barrels half-full, and the men sang songs about him. About the lake, about the cave, about Friesland, about the new kingdom, which was stronger than before. They were creative. They incorporated everything that frightened them into the verses—and then pretended that someone had fought with it in their place.

Beowulf listened, sometimes with a slight smile, sometimes through gritted teeth. It was strange to have his own past put into the mouths of guys who were making faces while he did so.

He noticed how the songs changed. Before, he was "the stranger who slew monsters." Now he was "our king who breaks the spears." The sense of ownership grew. He was no longer the man who emerged from the darkness when there was a fire. He was the piece of furniture in the middle of the room, covered with tablecloths of anticipation.

Crown, bottle cap, cold nights. The chair, the mug, the shivering.

Sometimes he thought about leaving. Just getting down from the chair, out of the hall, onto a boat, somewhere where no one knew his name. Some small coastline, a village without

stories. A woman who didn't see him as a king, but as a man who smelled of salt and old metal and took off his shoes at the door.

The thought never lasted long. The kingdom was too deeply ingrained in him. Not as pride. As a burden. You don't walk away from a group of people whose fear you've already inhaled. Even if you wanted to.

And so he continued to sit in the chair, drinking in portions that kept his head clear enough, and learned that a king lives less with victories than with what remains when the battle is over: bills, widows, cracks in the roof, children who ask why the sky hangs so low.

The cold nights became the norm. Not just in winter. The chill wasn't just in the air anymore, it was in the role. Knowing that you'd always be the first person they'd stare at when the next storm hit.

He wasn't born a king. He was a beaten dog, put on a chair because everyone else was trembling too much. And he did what beaten dogs do best: he stayed put. He growled when danger came. And he bit anyone who came too close to what was now "his" court.

Later they would say those years were the strong years of his empire. The time when everything held up. He himself would have preferred to call them "the time when the manure wasn't high enough to spill over the beams."

But that was already more than many kingdoms had ever possessed. And somewhere far behind all that, something else was already warming up. Something that was not a campaign, not a Frisian, not a petty prince. Something that breathed fire and rested on gold.

For the moment, the crown, the bottle cap, and the cold nights were enough. The rest waited. Patiently.

The years didn't arrive with fanfare; they arrived with backaches. They crept into the joints at night, settled in the fingers, and lodged in the knees. In the morning, Beowulf felt them first, before his eyes were even fully open. The bones became chroniclers: "That was the blow in the lake back then," reported the shoulder. "This is the fall in Friesland," growled the knee. "And this," grumbled the back, "is every single day on this accursed chair."

The kingdom grew accustomed to him. Like one grows accustomed to a persistent toothache. It doesn't hurt every moment, but you know it's there. People began to see him no longer as the man who had once nearly drowned in a strange lake. He was now the one who collected taxes, halved blood feuds, banned bad beer, and paid good blacksmiths better.

They weren't glorious reforms. He made sure the men who held his spears at the edge of the realm didn't go around with rotten straps and brittle blades. He ensured that the children of those who had died for him didn't have to sit at the very end of the table. He had a few particularly greedy petty princes reminded in front of the assembled troops that a kingdom isn't just their shit-filled field.

None of it made for good songs. Songs continued to be sung about the monster in the lake, about the ride to Friesland, about the coronation after the bloodshed. No one sang about how he halved a widow's taxes because her field had flooded the previous winter. No one

romanticized the scene in which he listened to three quarreling farmers because a pig had crossed the wrong border.

In the quieter hours, Beowulf understood that this was the real battle. Not the one great blow against a beast everyone hated. But this endless chain of small skirmishes against human stupidity, greed, and fear. You no longer slay dragons. You argue with men who believe the gods have personally promised them the better piece of land.

Sometimes he would stand on the rampart in the evenings, gazing out at the sea. The water was still the same old bastard. It rolled against the shore as if to say, "I'm still here. If you get too comfortable, I'll come in and remind you."

Skari often stood beside him. The old warrior was truly old now, the way wood ages: cracked, but not broken. His beard was grayer, his hands sometimes trembled when he lifted a jug, but his eyesight was as sharp as ever.

“Do you know what has changed?” he asked once, as they stood there, the wind catching their coats.

“Everything,” said Beowulf.

“No,” said Skari. “Before, we died because we were young and stupid. Now they die because we are old and reasonably wise. That’s the difference.”

Beowulf looked at the young men in the courtyard. They were practicing with wooden swords, striking too hard, laughing too loudly, leaving gaps that would invite arrows in real battle. Some cast furtive glances at him—that fixed, hungry stare, meaning: “Let me become like you, but without the scars.”

"I don't know what's better," murmured Beowulf. "To die young and stupid, or to stay old and awake."

"Stay old and alert," Skari said. "Then at least you can tell them not to make stupid mistakes like we did. They'll make them anyway. But at least you tried."

It wasn't long before the first generation raised under his rule was lying in the dirt. Not in any legendary battles, but in the usual clashes. A raid by a few lunatics on the coast, a feud that spiraled out of control, a winter that left men on patrol standing in the cold until their fingers turned black.

The dead grew younger, he grew older. That was the balance. He looked into the mothers' faces and knew that behind some of their glances lay a silent sentence: "If you weren't king, he wouldn't have been out there."

They didn't say it. Not out loud. But a crown acts like an antenna. It picks up everything that no one wants to shout.

He began to collect names. Not of kings, not of princes. Of his boys. Those who had stood with him by the lake, in Friesland, on the hills, on the borders. One by one, they disappeared from the hall, not suddenly, more like benches left empty.

One was named Heremod, a stubborn dog with a crooked nose and crooked teeth. He had crept into the hall as a scrawny little rascal, worked his way up to the warriors, and eventually stood next to Beowulf in the battle line. He didn't fall in the main fight. He died from a wound that had initially been called "just a cut." The thing became infected, eating its way through flesh, bone, fever, delirium. In the end, all that remained was a small pile of bones and a mother who was speechless.

Beowulf sat by his bed as Heremod muttered, half feverish, half in some liminal state. "I always thought I'd die with my sword in my hand," he slurred.

“You did too,” said Beowulf. “It was only a small blade. It makes no difference.”

Heremod died with a grin that looked as if he'd gotten the joke. Beowulf was left with the realization that death has no sense of style.

On other days, they came from the borders with corpses wrapped in blankets. Boys who barely had beards, but already bore scars. They carried them into the hall, laid them side by side, as if they were wood waiting to be burned.

"They were brave," the men said. Again and again. Because that was the only thing you could say about young dead people without banging your own head against a wall.

Beowulf often stood by, watching as the coins were placed on their eyes, listening to the shallow speeches the priests muttered, and thinking: Bravery is a cheap consolation. They would rather be cowards and alive. But nobody asks them.

The cold nights grew longer. Not just because of the seasons. When the hall was empty, he sometimes didn't sit on a chair, but on one of the low benches, where the boys who now lay in the smoke had sat. He rested his elbows on his knees, hung his head, and listened to the wood. Halls store voices. Every crack holds a few words that never quite leave.

Sometimes he thought he heard them: the laughter of boys insulting each other at the table. The clanging of wooden practice swords. The first off-key songs, in which someone had tried to rhyme their name and only produced rubbish.

He drank tranquility in rations. One cup to calm the undead in his mind. A second to keep him from running to the armory at every gust of wind. Then he stopped. He was afraid of the point where he drank more to rid himself of his own turmoil.

“You are becoming soft,” he said to himself one evening when he saw his face reflected in a mead surface.

"You're getting old," the liquid corrected.

Skari gradually drifted away from him. Not suddenly. First, he missed a few drills. Then he fell behind on campaigns. "My legs just won't cooperate anymore," he said, as if it were a casual remark. "I'll stay here and see if the wall is still standing."

One winter, when the snow lay scattered across the yard like old flour, they found Skari on the bench in the corner in the morning. He sat there as if still listening, his head slightly tilted,

his hands on his knees. Only his chest no longer rose and fell. No hero's death, no iron, no blood. His heart had simply said: "Enough."

Beowulf stood before him for a while. He was used to losing men in battle. But one who simply vanished while sitting struck him as odd.

"You did us a favor," he murmured. "You left without taking us with you."

They burned Skari on a smaller pyre than the kings, but larger than those of ordinary men. Not because he was more important. Because Beowulf wanted it that way. "He was my mirror," he said when someone asked. "And you don't just throw mirrors away."

As the years passed, he increasingly noticed that the ranks in front of him on the field were getting younger. Faces that looked at him before the battle began, faces that held more faith in him than in themselves. When he roared "Forward!", they marched with him, not because they were convinced, but because they knew his voice.

In the evenings, after such fights, when they returned with the usual cuts, bruises, and a few fewer heads, the thought crept into his mind: I send them out, I bring them back, I count the gaps. And in the end, I'll still be sitting here.

“Is this justice?” he once asked the Grey Man when they were alone.

"What?"

"That the young die and the old sit and decide how to pronounce their names?"

The gray man shrugged. "Justice is a word invented by men because they can't stand chance. The gods roll dice, we call it order. That's all there is to it."

"And what is a good king?"

"Someone who makes sure the die doesn't just have one face," said the Grey Man. "Someone who doesn't always send the same person to the brink of destruction. Someone who at least remembers who fell for him."

Beowulf noticed that the chair beneath him was growing heavier. Not the wood. That was the same old, tired material. But what lay upon it. Men he had known, beaten, rebuked, and praised, of whom now only names remained, recited at certain feasts.

It wasn't the monsters breathing down his neck. It was the young corpses in his mind. Rows of faces that had briefly lit up and then vanished into the mud.

When he stepped outside and heard the voices of the young men, laughing, arguing, boasting, a part of him felt both proud and weary. It was as if he were standing in a garden he hadn't planted but had always watered, only to watch every other plant succumb to the frost.

He began to be frightened by reflections in mirrors. In polished shields, in still waters, in dark windows. The face that looked back at him was not that of the young bastard who had thrown himself into the lake with too much courage. It was one marked by lines. Not just from battles, but from sitting, listening, deciding.

The crown, which he never actually wore very often—it was more symbol than adornment—had nevertheless left its mark. In the way his shoulders rounded. In the way he entered a room. In the way he briefly tested every laugh before joining in.

Crown, bottle cap, cold nights – it was a package deal. You couldn't have one without the other.

And somewhere, deep inside him, a sentence grew quietly, one that didn't yet have a full consciousness: I am growing old among young corpses.

He didn't say it out loud. Not yet. But it was there, like a splinter in the flesh that you feel when you clench your hand into a fist.

The monsters were waiting. The real ones. The ones with scales and fire. But before they came, he had to learn something else: what it was like to grow old in a land where the earth constantly ate new holes into which it laid its young.

The cold nights didn't get warmer. He just got used to breathing through them.

CHAPTER 17 – How to Grow Old Among Young Corpses

Growing old isn't a straight path. It's more like a courtyard after a long winter: puddles everywhere, tripping hazards, mud, hidden holes you step into even though you know exactly where they are. Beowulf didn't notice it in the mirror at first—no one used one around here anyway, except perhaps a few vain younger warriors when they were adjusting their braids. He noticed it from the sounds he made when he got up.

Before, there was only silence. Legs out of bed, feet on the floor, off he went. Now there was a little concert: a crack in the knee, a dull tug in the hip, a soft curse that came automatically from his throat, even before he was fully awake. His body kept a record. And he read it every morning.

Boys ran around the courtyard, talking too fast and laughing too loudly. They hacked at each other with wooden swords, missing more than they hit, then went into the hall and stuffed themselves with bread as if each bite would glue more muscle mass to their bones. They had that look Beowulf once had: "The world will notice me."

He sometimes watched them from the sidelines. Leaning against a post, arms folded, weight distributed so his knee wouldn't complain too much. He saw them trying to outdo each other. Who could withstand a blow with their shield the longest. Who could dish it out faster. Who talked the loudest about how they would one day be in a song.

He knew some of their names. Others he didn't. Some names he remembered immediately—because they resonated with him. A laugh that seemed familiar, a way of standing that he recognized. Others passed him by like smoke. He knew that most of them would meet some kind of death: in the field, on the rampart, in a fever bed, drunk in a ditch. And that he would be the one delivering or receiving the news.

This is how one grows old among young corpses: by standing still long enough until those walking around you fall.

It began with funerals that were all too similar. At first, they were rare, something special. A grand funeral pyre, a name that caught in your throat when you said it aloud. Then they became routine, as much as you wanted to hate the word. Another pile of wood, another body, more coins on your eyes, another few verses, another cup you drank because otherwise you'd have to scream.

"He was brave," people said after each of them.

"He was young," thought Beowulf. "That is the real crime."

The mothers wore their grief like different cloaks. Some screamed, scratched, almost threw themselves into a fire. Others stood still, lips pressed together, eyes dry, as if they didn't want to grant the world the pleasure of seeing them cry. Still others became hollow inside, as if they had decided to drag the rest of their lives along as mere shadows.

Beowulf always stood somewhere to the side. Not quite at the front, not quite at the back. He knew his face was part of the story. "The king was there," they told each other later. As if that were some consolation. As if his presence could make the smell of burnt flesh more bearable.

After the third funeral in a month—border dispute, two robberies, a stupid accident with a damned wild boar—he sat in the hall and realized the noise no longer reached him. Voices bounced off him like arrows off a shield he no longer wanted to hold up. He stared at the rim of his cup, his fingers clenched around it as if he were holding on tight.

Eadgils, the Grey, sat down beside him. He himself was a kind of living chronicle – no one knew how old he was, only that he had outlived more kings than was good for a person.

"You're becoming quieter," said the old man.

"I'm not getting quieter," growled Beowulf. "I'm just less inclined to say the same things out loud over and over again."

"What things?"

"That we sacrifice our young people and then act as if the gods have swallowed themselves."

Eadgils shifted the cup between his hands. “We have fewer deaths than others,” he said. “Other kingdoms lose more boys for less reason.”

“Should I pat myself on the back for that?” Beowulf asked sharply. “'Congratulations, you only buried five sons, not twenty?'”

The gray man shrugged. "Growing old means knowing the numbers," he said. "If you only see the faces, you'll go crazy. If you only see the numbers, you'll become a cold bastard. You have to stay somewhere in between. That's the job."

Beowulf drank. The mead was flat, or his tongue was tired of distinguishing the two. "I was never told that being king mainly consists of counting funerals."

“No one ever tells you what’s important,” replied the Grey Man. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t even take the chair in the first place.”

When he was younger, death had been an adversary. A tangible thing that stood before him, with teeth, claws, and steel. You could punch it in the face, tear off its arm, slit its throat. Now, death was more of a mist. It was everywhere. In colds that wouldn't go away. In falls from ladders. In arguments that escalated too quickly. It crept into the beds of the old and the dreams of the young. It came through the tiniest cracks into the courtyard while they patrolled the gates.

Beowulf didn't soften, but he broadened. Mentally. His view of what constituted a "good death" changed. Dying out in a field, sword in hand? Romantic bullshit. Many of them died in the dirt they themselves had urinated on, with shit-stained shirts and eyes wide with panic. Dying in bed? Sometimes worse, yes. But sometimes simply: less spectacle, more truth.

There were days when no one died. Yes, there were. Then he would sit in the courtyard, watch teenagers practicing, listen to the clanking of wooden swords, the barking of dogs, the bickering of two women arguing over a bowl. Those days felt like stolen coins. Small, bright moments that you know the next storm will take back twice as much.

On such a day, the sun pretending to still be in charge of them, a boy stood before him who had hesitated too long to remain a child and had lived too short a time to be a man.

“Sir,” the boy said, pressing his hands together as if to stop them from trembling. “How do you know when you’re ready to go out with you?”

Beowulf looked at him for a moment. The face was new, but the question was old. He himself had once asked it, somewhere, sometime, to a man who had now long lain beneath the earth and stories.

"If you stop asking such questions," he said.

The boy swallowed. "So that means I'm not ready yet?"

“They say you think too much,” Beowulf replied. “But I prefer that to you not thinking at all. Go practice. Hit someone bigger than you. If you can still walk after that, we’ll talk further.”

The boy left. Beowulf watched him as he plunged into the crowd of others, stumbling from wood to wood, laughing as if the world were a playground stained with blood.

"You could have sent him away," said Eadgils, who had once again appeared nearby like a shadow that would not rest.

"I sent him away," growled Beowulf.

“Completely,” said the old man. “Out of the hall, out of the rows. You’ll get more and more of those who will beg you to give them a seat in the front row.”

“If I send them all away,” said Beowulf, “eventually I’ll only have old fogies left around me. Then we’ll all die at once. The young ones aren’t just victims. They’re also the ones who give us a few more years.”

Eadgils nodded slowly. "That's the dirty part," he muttered. "For you to grow old, enough young people have to die. And you have to live long enough to learn to hate it."

In the evenings, Beowulf lay on his cot, furs draped over him, cold feet tingling, listening to the farmyard. The sound of snoring men, the soft creaking of wood in the walls, the wind rubbing against the rafters. And interspersed throughout, that other sound, heard only by him: a faint rustling of names.

Heremod. Skari. Wulfgar – who was still alive, but had slowed down. Names that lay like stones in his mind. When he closed his eyes, he saw their faces, sometimes younger, sometimes as they had last stood before him.

His life had previously been divided into large chapters: the lake, Heorot, homecoming, Huglac, Friesland. Now everything converged. It was no longer a heroic poem. It was an inventory. Injuries, decisions, faces.

Sometimes he remembered his youth, nights spent sleeping outside, drunk in the grass, the sky for a roof, the sea a background sound. He thought of the lightness in his bones. Of the naturalness with which he had assumed that each new day would be another, not another.

Now he counted differently. Every day was one he stole from the boys. One more than those who vanished into the smoke at fifteen, twenty, twenty-five.

"Why me?" he muttered into the darkness. No answer. The gods, as always, were busy causing trouble somewhere else.

Something new crept at the edge of its sleep. No longer a lake, no mother emerging from the mire. More like heat. A dull, deep breathing that didn't come from people. A glimmer, not green, not like stagnant water, but reddish-gold, as if someone had dumped glowing coals beneath the horizon.

He woke up to the dampness of his blanket from sweat. The hall around him, the same sounds, the same smell of smoke. Only his heart was beating too fast.

"Fire Mountain again?" asked a voice beside him. Wulfgar, who had long since learned to divide his own sleep into stages.

“Yes,” said Beowulf.

"Does he really exist?"

“Not yet,” Beowulf replied. “But he is getting closer.”

Wulfgar remained silent. It was one of those answers you didn't want to dissect further if you wanted to live before breakfast.

Thus Beowulf grew old among young corpses. Not in one grand gesture, not in a heroic "I'm finished" moment, but in a thousand small cuts inflicted by the years.

In the mornings he got up, his bones creaking. During the day he spoke with people who expected more than he could give. In the evenings he counted those who were missing. At night he heard fire breathing.

And somewhere beyond all that, deep in the future, a dragon lay upon gold. But he wasn't there yet. For now, it was simply a matter of breathing on in a kingdom that tasted of iron and fear—and whose soil held too many young bodies for an old man to sleep peacefully at night.

Growing old came eventually, the moment he realized they no longer expected him to be in the front row. It wasn't a conversation, no official decision. No "Sir, you'd better stay here." It was a slow shift of glances, of roles, of words.

It began with a ride to the border. Nothing major—a few cattle rustlers who had gotten a little too bold, a petty lord who thought his coat of arms was wider than the road. In earlier times, Beowulf would have put on his helmet, taken up his spear, strapped on his horse, and ridden ahead, simply because otherwise it would have felt wrong.

This time it took him a while to get up from the chair. His knees were heavy, his hip was aching, his shoulder was pulling. Nothing dramatic. Just that feeling of "it used to be better."

“I’ll ride ahead,” said a young man, before Beowulf had even spoken. His name was Hygdstan; he was slender but tough, with a scar above his lip that gave him a constant half-smile, even when he didn’t feel like laughing.

“You?” asked Beowulf.

“You have more important things to do,” Hygdstan said without stuttering. “Someone has to sit here and keep the place running. I can beat up cattle rustlers. I need someone else to list for me later what I’m dying for.”

In the hall, they laughed briefly. Beowulf did not. He looked into the boy's face and recognized something dangerous in it: a willingness to take his place. Not out of betrayal. Out of logic.

“I’ll ride along,” he said anyway.

Hygdstan's lips twitched almost imperceptibly. A mixture of respect, dashed hope, and that quiet fear that the old man was overestimating himself. "As you wish, sir," he said.

They rode out. After two hours in the saddle, Beowulf felt his hip like a poorly forged nail. After four hours, his shoulder ached, even though he had only used it to breathe in time with the riding. After six hours, he felt the return route was a relief, even though the "battle" had been a joke: three men who lost heart when they saw the banners, a brief exchange of blows, a broken arm, a couple of bloody noses.

That evening in the courtyard, he saw Hygdstan standing amidst the boys, reenacting the story with gestures, laughter, and exaggeration. "And then," he exclaimed, "he came charging at me like an angry bull, and I thought: If I don't lay him down right now, I'll be laughing at myself tomorrow!" The boys roared with laughter.

One of them looked towards the hunting stand, scrutinizing the situation. Beowulf caught that look. It said: "Why weren't you the bull?"

Later, in the room behind the hall, he sat at the table with the cup in front of him and felt the tiredness no longer remain in his body, but creep into his head.

"You don't have to be at the front of everything," said the grey man, who sat there as if he had been nailed to the bench. "You're no longer a battering ram. You're the wall behind it."

“I am still the one who takes the heat,” said Beowulf.

“Yes,” said the old man. “But differently. If you fall at the front, the whole shop falls with you. If the boy falls at the front, it’s tragic. If you fall, it’s a hole through which everything seeps.”

Beowulf drank. The cup sounded hollow as he set it down. "Nice analogy," he murmured. "Are you promoting aging?"

“Getting old doesn’t advertise,” Eadgils replied. “It just sends bills.”

The bills came in the form of names younger than his. Hygdstan got by for a few years. He wasn't stupid. He was learning. He no longer blindly rushed forward, but looked left and right, counted heads, read faces. Beowulf saw himself in him, only lighter. Less mire, more air.

"You like him," Wulfgar remarked at some point, as the three of them stood by the wall.

"I like that he can still laugh," said Beowulf.

"You can laugh too."

“Yes,” he replied. “But I need to remind myself more often.”

The day Hygdstan died wasn't one of storms or dramatic skies. It was one of those long, gray days where the rain seemed more intentional than actual water. The clouds hung like dirty rags someone had forgotten to take down.

A messenger came riding up, the horse foaming with foam, the boy on top with eyes that said everything before he uttered a sound.

“Attack… border village… there were too few of them… Hygdstan…”

Beowulf didn't need to hear the rest. The words were interchangeable. Border village, raid, too few. Hygdstan was just the new weight at the end of the chain.

He rode there anyway. Not because he believed he could still change anything. Because he wanted to see where and how someone who was only recently the future can become the past.

The village stank of damp wood, blood, and burnt pig hair. A few houses were half-burned, a few intact but empty. Two bodies lay roughly covered in the square. The others had already been gathered up; someone had believed in order.

Hygdstan lay beside the well. A blanket covered him, his face uncovered. Someone had closed his eyes. Beowulf was grateful. He didn't want to see how the boy had last viewed the world.

The cut went from the side into the neck, precisely where the helmet ceased to offer protection. No heroic massacre, just a clean blow, delivered at the right time and in the right place.

Beowulf knelt beside him. His knees protested. He ignored them. He looked at the boy's face, which in death suddenly looked like that of a child whose toy had been taken away.

"What happened?" he asked the man next to him.

"They came from the forest," he said, his voice dull. "Too many of them. He tried to keep them away until we got the women and children out. It almost worked."

Almost. That damned word.

Beowulf placed Hygdstan's hand on his chest. It was stiff, cold, but not yet completely out of the world. "You wanted to ride ahead," he murmured. "Congratulations. You arrived before me."

It was not a prayer, not a blessing. Just a statement of fact.

They burned him there, closer to the border than Beowulf would have liked. But the boy had lived there, fought there, fallen there. It seemed fitting to him that his smoke should rise where the line creaked.

Hygdstan was one of many. That made it worse, not easier. Every boy died as an individual, even though the hearts of the old people began to see them in piles.

Back in the hall, Beowulf sat on the chair and listened to the reports. Numbers. Wounded. Missing. Burned-down houses. The usual stuff. They could have printed it on wooden tablets and simply changed the names each year.

At night, when the hall was empty, when only embers glowed beneath the ashes, he sat alone on the lowest step of the hunting stand. Not at the top. At the bottom. The wood was hard, his back tired.

He thought about the boys he encountered every day. Their jokes, their foolishness, their small victories in training. The way they tried to imitate him, how they held the shield, how they gripped the spear.

"How to grow old among young corpses," he whispered into the darkness. "You learn to slowly hate yourself—and yet you carry on."

The words hung in the smoke. Nobody answered.

The next day, he did what kings do. He ordered stronger patrols. He had the wall repaired. He sent messengers to the minor prince near whose village the village lay, making it clear that gaps would no longer occur if the man didn't treat his people like sheep.

“You can’t save everyone,” said Eadgils as they studied the map, on which small pieces of wood marked villages, outposts, and paths.

“But I can’t pretend this is just a board game,” Beowulf replied.

The years dragged on. One after the other. The boys became men, the men became names, the names became stories, and in the end, he remained. Still.

His own hands became bony. The skin over them thinned. The scars became more pronounced. He noticed that the swords felt heavier in his hands. Not because they were thicker, but because his muscles had decided to renegotiate the contract.

He was still fighting. But differently. Shorter, more focused fights. No more wild bursts of energy, no more youthful fury. More like: "I am here, I strike, I don't roam." He was less of a storm, more of a boulder.

The boys still looked at him with that mixture of awe and impatience. They wanted him to remain forever as he had been in the stories they had heard about him. Unchanging. A living statue.

"They don't notice that you have a limp," Wulfgar once remarked, as he watched him slowly walk up the stairs.

“The stairs do that,” said Beowulf. “Not I.”

"They only see the part of you that appears in the song," Wulfgar added. "Not the part that curses your chair at night."

"Perhaps it's for the best," Beowulf murmured. "If they knew how unheroic growing old is, they would shoot themselves sooner."

Quiet months followed. Almost a year in which nothing major happened. No raids beyond the usual. No village vanished completely. No prince suddenly claiming to be Wotan himself. The boys began to grow restless. They wanted something to talk about.

Not Beowulf. For him, those quiet months were like warm stones to lie on after standing in the rain enough. He walked through the halls, across the courtyard, saw the men training, the women working, the children playing, and thought: "It could stay like this. Just one more damned moment."

It was during this time that he most clearly realized what it was like to grow old among young corpses. Not when someone had just died, but when everyone still alive acted as if they were immortal. He was the only one who saw the gaps.

On evenings when the fire burned quietly, he sometimes told different stories. Not stories of monsters and battles. But stories of small mistakes from which nothing had been learned.

“There was one,” he once said, as the boys sat around him, half on their cups, half on his words, “who took off his helmet in battle because he thought he had to show his face so the men would follow him. An arrowhead really appreciated that.”

"So?" someone asked. "Did he at least get the others on board?"

“Perhaps,” said Beowulf. “But he never saw it.”

They laughed uncertainly because they didn't know whether this was a heroic tale or a warning.

"And what is the teaching?" asked another.

Beowulf looked at him long enough that the boy shifted uncomfortably. "That your face is less important than your damned skull," he said. "Remember that."

They nodded. Some pretended to understand. Others didn't. Life is generous with opportunities to demonstrate stupidity.

The fire mountain appeared more frequently in his dreams. It drew closer, became clearer. Sometimes he saw gold in his dreams, lying in the glow of something molten. Sometimes he heard a sound, deep, vibrating, like a very tall man coughing in his sleep.

"Perhaps it's just your bones," said Wulfgar when Beowulf once told him about it.

“My bones make different noises,” he replied. “They don’t sound so… big.”

"Maybe some god wants to tell you something."

"They haven't spoken to me for years. Why would they start now?"

He laughed, but the laughter caught in his throat too quickly. Because somewhere in that mixture of iron, fear, weariness, and young corpses, it was clear: the big things weren't over yet. He was old—at least by the standards of this world—but not old enough to be spared.

How does one grow old among young corpses? One learns to simultaneously hope that nothing great is coming anymore – and to know that this is a lie.

Beowulf looked out to sea, looked into the flames, looked into faces he used to like to address by name, but now often only recognized as "the next one up".

And on the nights when the wind swept through the hall like a thin blade, he thought: If this is all there is – these funerals, these conversations, these little wars – then perhaps I have gotten off lightly.

But he knew that somewhere beyond the horizon lay something that would one day force him not only to manage old pain, but to create new pain.

The young bodies were just the beginning.

Growing old isn't the moment your first tooth falls out. It's the moment when, after a battle, you no longer immediately want to know how many you killed—but first ask how many of your own were left behind. Beowulf realized this during one of those unspectacular border skirmishes that never later appeared in any song.

A few men from the east had decided that the border was just an idea, not a real line. They tested it. Like everyone else. A few heads, a few spears, nothing to worry about, as they used to say. They sent a handful of their men; Beowulf sent a handful of his. In the old days, he would have ridden at the front himself. This time he stood further back. Not by much. Just far enough to see everything.

It didn't take long. Steel, wood, screams, dirt. The usual gloomy symphony. His men did their job. So did the others. In the end, a few bodies lay scattered across the wet grass, as if someone had thrown the bones of half a village into the air and seen where they would land.

He used to throw himself into the final duels, shouldering someone aside, correcting someone with his blade. Now he stood still while the boys finished the job. He just watched. And when the noise subsided, the sentence came out of his mouth before he'd even cleaned his sword:

"Count ours."

Not: "How many of them?" Not: "Who has the leader?" Only: "How many of us are missing?"

There were two of them. A boy he only vaguely knew, and one of the older ones who always laughed too loudly. Both were lying on their backs, both with that slumped face that dead people have when no one was there to watch them die.

“Two,” one murmured.

“These?” asked Beowulf.

"Four. Maybe five. The one in the back is half-grown."

Beowulf nodded. He used to think: Okay, we're better. Now he thought: Two mothers, maybe three wives, five children. And a king who, at the next feast, will have to spout some more bullshit about courage and necessity.

On the way home, the boys in the line behind him talked about the few blows they had landed particularly well. "Did you see how I kicked the spear out of his hand?" – "That one with the red helmet, I knocked his nose right across his face." It sounded like the conversation after a good catch at sea.

Beowulf remembered how he himself had once spoken like that. Back when every cut was proof that you were alive. Now it felt more like marks on a notch that would eventually tear the wood apart.

That evening in the hall, the noise was the same as always after a victory. Mead, voices, that forced laughter that masked more fear than it celebrated joy. Beowulf sat up high, cup in hand, and saw Hygdstan's younger brother standing in the crowd. The boy looked like him, except he didn't yet have the scar on his lip that was always grinning. He laughed anyway. Because he didn't yet understand what his family had to do with military campaigns, statistically speaking.

"You have to be careful how you look at them," Wulfgar said quietly beside him. "Otherwise they'll realize that you already know how they end up."

“I know nothing,” replied Beowulf. “I only see what is missing.”

In the quieter hours that followed—and there were some, even if brief—aging came in small gestures. He caught himself pausing in front of a door to straighten his back before going in, so the men wouldn't see the momentary stab of pain in his lower back. He found himself waking up in the night without any noise to rouse him, simply because his bones had decided that an old battle needed to be reenacted.

It was the faces that were seared into his memory. Not those of his enemies. They were gone. Strangers don't stay in your mind for long. It was his own. The boy with the crooked nose who had laughed too hard during a training exercise and lay in a ditch a year later. The woman who had snapped at him in the hall because he had sent her husband to the border again—and who the next time stood there with her head bowed, because all she could do was sit by the fire and stare into the flames.

Growing old among young corpses also means learning to hate your own excuses. "It had to be done." "We had no choice." "Otherwise, more would have died." Each one probably plausible. Each one simultaneously true and cowardly.

Beowulf spoke about it less often. In the past, after battles, he would try to give the men some kind of meaning. A few harsh words to frame the chaos. "We did this so that..." Now he more often just stood there with a shrug.

“Why, sir?” a boy once asked him, standing next to a fresh burial mound, too small for the body underneath.

Beowulf looked at him, saw the dirt under his fingernails, the red eyes, the duality of anger and sorrow in that far too young face.

“Because we live too close together and no one wants to admit it,” he said. “Because we want things that the other person doesn’t want to give up. Because we’re afraid that someone will exploit our fear. Take your pick. It doesn’t change anything.”

The boy nodded, but not because he understood. Rather, because he realized there was no answer that would make the hill in front of him any smaller.

At night, when the hall fell silent, Beowulf sometimes wandered the corridors like a ghost. He ran his fingertips along the walls, over notches, old burn marks, and carved names that no one could connect to a face anymore. Every hall eventually becomes a graveyard of letters.

He often paused outside the ramparts, longer than necessary. The guards knew the sight: the tall, broad figure in the cloak, staring into the darkness as if there were more than just night. Some said he was searching for the gods. Others, for monsters. Beowulf knew he didn't truly want to find either. He was searching more for some kind of answer to why he was still walking when so many others were already lying down.

"Perhaps you have something to make up for," said Wulfgar, after he had once followed him outside.

"With whom?"

“For everyone,” Wulfgar murmured. “For those you took into the lake. For those who sailed with you to Friesland. For the boys who died for your kingdom. Perhaps you may only stop when the score is more or less settled.”

Beowulf laughed dryly. "The math never adds up," he said. "And if it's gods who are setting it, then they're bad accountants."

The dream of the fire mountain became clearer. It was no longer just a glow. It took on contours. Rocks, a slope that devoured the sky. An entrance like a maw, from which not air, but something else emerged: hot, heavy, golden-warm. And the breathing – this deep, patient in-and-out, which knew no haste.

Sometimes he dreamt of young men standing before this mountain. None of them had faces. They were just silhouettes of flesh and hope. When he got closer, he saw that their armor looked like that of his own boys.

He woke up with a noise in his head that had nothing to do with the usual bone cracking. It was that deep, rumbling growl that announces things no one has asked for.

“Something big is coming,” he said one morning to the horror, as they stood bent over a map that showed the borders of the empire, small, crooked lines across a country that didn’t care.

“Something big always comes along,” Eadgils replied. “Between the little things we eat every day.”

“No,” Beowulf insisted. “Not like that. Different. Everything we’ve done so far has been foreplay.”

The Grey Man gazed at him for a long time. In his eyes lay that weary knowledge: if a man like Beowulf calls something "different," it probably really is different.

“Then you should stop acting like you’re finished,” said the old man. “You are old. But not dead. And as long as you’re not dead, we still have a buffer between the young and what’s waiting out there.”

Beowulf thought of the corpses that lay in his mind. Of the graves, the pyres, the names that fell on his chest like stones at night.

How does one grow old among young corpses? One accepts that in the end, one must still be at the forefront, even though one has done everything to send the young ones away first. You repeatedly reach the point where you realize there is no longer a line behind which you are allowed to stay.

He slowly extended his fingers until his knuckles crunched. "Okay," he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else. "Just one more chapter then."

Outside, over the hills, the wind flowed as if it knew more. The sea breathed in the background. And somewhere, beyond what the maps showed, something lay sleeping on a pile of gold, as if it had all the time in the world.

The boys laughed in the courtyard. They practiced with wooden swords. They told each other stories about the old king who had slain monsters in his youth. They had no idea that their own stories were already on their way, with sharp teeth and fire in their bellies.

Beowulf looked at them, saw the gaps they would one day leave behind, and continued to breathe. Old, yes. Surrounded by young corpses, yes. But not finished yet.

The quiet years, in which the Reich pretended things could continue as they were forever, were already approaching. And with them, the noise that can only be heard in the mind.

CHAPTER 18 – The quiet years full of noise in the head

The silent years didn't arrive with a messenger. No fanfare, no vision, no priest saying, "From now on, it will be quiet." They simply settled over the realm like dust on a table no one ever wipes again. At first you notice nothing, then you cough.

The raids became fewer, or smaller, or more insignificant. No one knew for sure. A few gangs along the coast, kicked aside like stray dogs. A few border disputes settled with threats and a brief visit from the king, where his gaze did more work than his blade. The great battles were absent. The men said, "It's a good sign." Beowulf thought, "It's a lull. And lulls are dangerous if you're a head that can't keep its mouth shut."

At first, it almost felt like a reward. The halls were filled, but no longer with the wounded and widows, but with men talking about the harvest, about fish, about the weather, as if they had ever listened to anyone. Children ran through the courtyard without being grabbed by an adult every three steps and warned about "watch out for flying arrows."

Beowulf often stood on the sidelines, watching. Men chopped wood, sharpened blades, mended straps, and built fences that seemed more suited to keeping pigs out of the fields than enemies out of the yard. It was almost idyllic, if you ignored the stench of entrails in your head.

“Now that’s what I call peace,” Wulfgar said at one point, as they stood side by side at the wall.

“That’s what I call peace and quiet, before someone gets any more foolish ideas,” replied Beowulf.

"Can't you just... enjoy it?"

Beowulf looked into the courtyard at the boys with the wooden swords, the women with the baskets, the dog stealing bread from a child. "I enjoy it," he said. "But I don't believe in it."

The noise moved inwards. Before, it had been loud outside: battle cries, the clash of metal on metal, the roars of men falling and those who thought their turn was coming. Now it was louder in his head than in the fields. Memories have no manners. They don't knock.

In the evenings, when the hall was full, he only half-listened. The voices of the living mingled with those of the dead. Heremod laughed somewhere in a corner, even though he had long since been cremated. Skari made one of his biting comments, even though his ashes had been scattered to the four winds. Huglac grunted for more mead, even though his belly had long since been overgrown with grass back in Friesland.

Those quiet years were full of such ghosts. Not those fairytale ghosts that stand by your bed at night, babbling prophecies with rattling teeth. More like remnants of sound, lodged in the cracks. A particular curse at the table, a way of laughing in the courtyard, a sword slipping from its scabbard and sounding, for a brief moment, just like it had back then in the lake.

Sometimes he saw another boy through one of them. One face would overlap another, as if two images didn't quite fit together. There was the newcomer with the red hair—and in the movement of his head, suddenly, was that of Hygdstan. There stood the son of a simple farmer, and in the way he held the spear was a shadow of Wulfgar when he was young. It was as if time were constantly telling him: "You repeat yourself. Only the names change."

The advisors loved this phase. Eadgils, the Grey, saw it as a blessing. "These are the years when you can build something," he said. "Walls, stores, trust. You can't just stand in blood, or you'll eventually get dizzy."

“I’ve been dizzy for a long time,” Beowulf murmured. “I’ve just gotten used to walking in a straight line.”

They used the lull to their advantage. They reinforced the walls, hired better blacksmiths, and traded with their neighbors before the latter realized that deals involving swords were easier. Granaries were built higher, fish smokehouses larger, and fields better divided. All that crap that never comes up in songs, but keeps an empire from collapsing.

People started talking about him differently. No longer just "Beowulf, the monster slayer," but "Beowulf, under whom we were fed." He heard this and didn't know whether to laugh or vomit. Same name, different justification. They always needed a story to put him in.

Despite everything, it remained noisy at night. The silence outside was like an empty vessel into which everything he had pushed aside over the years could fall.

Some nights he lay awake, listening to his own heartbeat like drums. Not that romantic "I'm alive" feeling. More like: "That thing in there still refuses to quit." He didn't count beats, he counted names. One beat: Æschere. Two: Skari. Three: Huglac. Four: Hygdstan. Five: the one without a face, the one they'd only found half a body of.

“You murmur in your sleep,” a woman once told him, whom he occasionally let into his bed when the night was pushing him too much into a corner.

"What do I say?"

“Names. And sometimes ‘no’,” she said. “Never ‘yes’.”

He laughed briefly, without humor. "Sounds like an honest account of my life," he said.

Those quiet years were the ones in which he began to feel alienated from his own body. His body craved rest, his mind was on edge. His hands no longer wanted to hold a blade, his mind constantly searching for a grip. When he trained with the boys, he noticed how their movements were no longer quite as fluid. He had to think, where everything had once been instinct.

Once, during a practice fight with wooden swords, he reacted too slowly. A boy hit him in the side, not hard, but clearly. The others laughed; the boy was frightened.

“Lord, I…”

Beowulf raised his hand and stopped him. "Good," he said. "Better you strike me with wood now than your opponent strikes you with steel later because you think you're not allowed to hit me."

The hall laughed again, this time genuinely. The boy looked relieved, but Beowulf sensed this other truth: the king was no longer untouchable. Not even in wood.

The quiet years were full of small cracks. Not just in his bones. In his stories. He caught himself contradicting earlier versions of himself.

“You once said…” Wulfgar began.

“Back then I had different bones,” Beowulf interrupted. “Back then it felt right. Not anymore.”

"And what do the gods say about that?"

"They're counting bets," he growled. "They're probably betting on when I'll finally make that last damn mistake."

Some evenings he sat alone in the hall after everyone else had left. The fire burned down. He heard the wood crackle, the embers settle. Sounds of something at work, even though no one was watching anymore.

That's how his head felt. Every day added more wood to the pile: an argument, a decision, a name, a face. At night, everything burned, even if no one was looking. Sparks flew, memories flew up, settled again, sometimes in a different place, sometimes closer to the edge.

"The quiet years," said the Grey Man, as they sat together at the card table one day, "are the years in which you get to know yourself."

“I know myself,” Beowulf replied.

“No,” said Eadgils. “You know the one who fights. Now you are getting to know the one who is left behind, after you have not died as you could have been so many times.”

Beowulf looked at his hands. They had grown thicker, veins running across the backs of his hands like ancient riverbeds. He thought of the boy he had once been, the swimmer in the lake, the stable boy, the mercenary, the bastard in the foreign royal court.

The person sitting there now was something else entirely. Not a hero. Not a martyr. More like a poor accountant with a sword: constantly balancing loss and gain, dead and survivors, peace and the knowledge that it won't last.

The quiet years were necessary. He knew that. The Reich needed them like a lung catching its breath between screams. But they were also torture. For the quieter it became outside, the more clearly he heard the noise inside his own skull.

Swords still clashed there, men still roared there, the green light of the old lake still danced there, now mingling with the reddish-gold shimmer of the new dreams. Something deep and vast coughed there, with fire in its belly.

Beowulf walked through his kingdom, heard the wind, the hammers, the laughter of children, the clucking of chickens, and above it all there was always this other layer: breath, fire, the rubbing of scales against stone – not really there, but also undeniable.

He had always longed for those quiet years, back when he lay in the dirt, spitting out blood. Now he had them. And he discovered that they brought him no peace, but only time in which his memories had enough space to rearrange the furniture.

Somewhere far away, beyond the wall, the sea, and the hills, something was stirring through the sleep. He felt it before the world did. And that's precisely what made the silence so loud.

There was something false about the calm, like a drunkard claiming to be merely tired. Everything was running smoothly, yes. The fields yielded enough to feed everyone, the cattle weren't dropping dead in droves, the boats returned, usually with more fish than corpses. The blacksmiths hammered iron into shapes that looked more like tools than weapons. But beneath it all lay that note, which only one person seemed to hear: Beowulf.

He noticed it on the days when nothing happened. No messengers rushing into the courtyard, drenched in sweat. No news of burning farms, no border disputes, no raids. Just everyday life. People said, "The gods are merciful to us." Beowulf thought, "The gods are taking a breath."

In the mornings, he often lingered at the table before getting up. He used to be outside at the first sound, when the pigs started arguing and the first buckets banged against the wood. Now he would sit for a moment, look at his hands, and listen to the farmyard stirring without him. It took him longer to jump up. Not because he didn't want to. Because something inside him said: Enjoy every second when no one calls "Master."

The advisors used this phase to push things on him that he had never previously taken the time for.

“We need to talk about inheritance,” Eadgils said one day.

“I am alive,” replied Beowulf. “That is my line of succession.”

"You will not live forever," said the Grey Man.

"Tell that to the boys who are already gone," growled Beowulf. "They didn't even have hair on their balls. I've paid my debt in death often enough."

“That’s exactly why,” the old man persisted. “You have to name someone. If you fall and no one knows who will get the chair, they’ll tear the empire to pieces like dogs tearing an old loaf of bread.”

Beowulf looked at the empty cup, which would soon be full again anyway. Names flashed through his mind. None of them fit. They were all too young, too soft, too greedy, too something. Or too much like himself, only without the years spent in the mire.

“I’m not naming anyone,” he said. “Not yet. If I put someone in that position before the time is right, they’ll eat them alive. Let the future make its own mistakes. I’ve had enough of mine.”

Eadgils blew air through his nose. "You're hesitating," he said.

“I am breathing,” Beowulf replied. “Hesitation is when you have a choice. I don’t have a good one.”

The quiet years also had their charms, if you looked hard enough. There were evenings when he sat down below, not in the hunting stand, but on a bench, among men who forgot he was king as soon as the third cup was empty. They told stories that had nothing to do with battles. About a bull that had run into a farmer's backside. About a dog that had learned how to force doors open. About an old man who spent more time on the latrine than chopping wood.

Beowulf would laugh along, sometimes so hard it hurt his stomach. In those moments, he was just another guy in a fur coat, reeking of smoke and stale sweat, delighting in the same primitive things as everyone else. And yet, there was always that thing hanging over him: the chair behind him, staring even when he turned his back on it.

The sons of the sons were growing up. That was new. He knew men, had fought with them, seen them fall, and now their sons ran through the yard, sometimes even their sons. Little rascals with sturdy legs, beating each other up with sticks as if they had been genetically inherited that hitting was a kind of language.

“That one,” Wulfgar once said, pointing at a small boy trying to carry a bucket that was too big, “is the grandson of someone you had to personally say goodbye to at his grave. Do you know that?”

Beowulf looked on. Eventually, the little boy angrily threw the bucket over, kicked it, and shouted at it as if the bucket were to blame for water being heavy.

“No,” said Beowulf. “And I don’t really want to know.”

"Why?"

"Because every new kid is a promise of a new funeral," he muttered. "The fewer faces I associate with the graves, the longer I sleep."

It was a lie. He wasn't sleeping any longer. The dreams were just becoming more detailed.

The volcano in his mind had become a familiar place. He saw it so often that he began to remember small details: a particular crack in the rock, a pine tree clinging to a slope, stones that looked as if they had once wanted to be houses.

And the gold. He didn't see it directly, but when the dream shifted perspective, it flickered in the depths. Not a nice, cozy gold, but that brazen glare that drives things mad. Something lay in the midst of that light. Large, curled up, breathing. Not a lake, not a person. Something that sounded as if Death had decided to change form for once.

Sometimes he woke up with his fists clenched, as if he had been trying to grasp a scale in his dream. He could feel his own nails in his palms. Bloody crescents.

"You need to talk to someone about it," said Wulfgar, after hearing him panting one of those nights.

"With whom? With you? You can't even sleep peacefully when your wife snores."

"With a seer. A priest. With that old fool who always claims he can read the flight of birds."

"He can't even read the way from the cup to the latrine without peeing next to it," growled Beowulf. "I'm not going to talk to him about things heavier than his bladder."

"So you mean you prefer talking to yourself?"

“I am the only one who knows what I saw,” said Beowulf. “The rest make a song out of it, or an omen, or an excuse for their laziness.”

During the day, there was enough for him to hold onto, to keep from completely losing his mind. He went out with the men when they repaired the wall, not just standing by, but lifting stones and hauling wood himself. Not for long, his body clearly showed him its limits, but long enough for them to see: the king could still lift a finger.

He spoke with the old men by the fire, who told stories from before his time. Of kings who had been dumber than him, but had reigned longer because they had died at the right time. Of empires that had long since perished because some idiot had thought he could tax the sea.

“In the end,” said a wrinkled fellow named Freawald, who looked as if he had been born an old man, “everything falls apart. Halls, empires, names. The only thing that remains is how ashamed you have been for as long as you live.”

“And how much I have made others ashamed,” Beowulf added.

"That's the bonus," grinned Freawald.

Such statements were helpful. Not as consolation, but as grounding. When everything falls apart, even one's own greatness becomes relative. And that's a good thing.

On other days, he was plagued by a strange kind of restlessness. Not an "I want to fight" urge. Rather, "If nothing comes from the outside, I start to set something on fire inside." He began to think more deeply about things he used to just do.

How many men do I really need at the border? How much gold can serve as a buffer before it awakens the greed of others? How much peace and quiet is healthy for a people conditioned their entire lives to the sounds of metal?

The Grey One warned him. "If you think too much, you'll forget to breathe," he said.

“If I don’t think enough, I forget that I have survived too many times,” Beowulf retorted.

The quiet years had a particularly nasty side: they left room for regret. Not the big, dramatic regret where someone falls to their knees in front of everyone, sobbing and shouting, "I was wrong!" No. The quiet regret that comes at night when you close your eyes and suddenly see that there were moments when you could have decided differently.

"What if I hadn't let Huglac go to Friesland back then?" he thought. "What if I had chosen a different path on that one campaign? What if…"

The questions were like rats. You feed one, and suddenly the whole hall is full.

One night he got up because those "what if" rats were nibbling at him too much. He went into the empty hall, didn't sit on the chair, but on the floor, his back against a post. There he sat, the great king who had slain monsters and held an empire together, on the cold floor like a boy lost in his own hut.

"If I had decided differently," he said quietly to the room, "something else would have gone wrong. Maybe I'd be dead, maybe half of you. Maybe we'd all be a footnote in someone's shitty song by now. So, whatever."

The hall responded with a crack in the beams. Wood knows no "what ifs." It only knows "holds" or "breaks."

The next day he was king again. He negotiated with a stubborn farmer who claimed the stream had shifted its course and his meadow was now royal land. He had a thief flogged for stealing from the same family for the third time. He posted a new guard at a spot that had been bothering him for weeks. Just the usual, run-of-the-mill administration of damned reality.

But deep inside his skull, the other thing continued. The fire mountain slid closer, the voices of the dead rearranged themselves, and the empire acted as if this state could last forever: a little work, a little mead, no major catastrophes.

“It could stay like this,” said a woman in the courtyard as she hung up laundry and the sun, for once, didn’t look like an offended barmaid.

"It never lasts," thought Beowulf, who overheard this by chance. "It only pretends to be that way until something strikes."

In those quiet years, he was at his most alive and at his most broken. His body had time to recover; the wounds had become scars, the scars lines, the lines part of a face people called "King." But his mind was a battlefield where everything happened at once: the past, the future, the lake, the hill, the gold, the fire.

The empire wasn't asleep, it was dozing. And somewhere in that dozing, he heard that deep, distant laughter. Not human laughter. Something else. As if someone were waking up underground and rubbing their eyes.

He didn't yet know that the silent years were merely the breaths needed by the thing that slept there. And that the noise in his head was nothing more than the faint echo of something that would soon become very loud.

The silent years eventually developed fine cracks, so thin that most mistook them for drawings in the plaster. Beowulf saw them earlier. Perhaps because he had learned to pay attention to the shimmering at the edges, not to the grand scene in the center.

At first, it was the stories that crept into the hall. No alarm, no panic, just chatter. A trader from the south, who one evening ate a piece of cheese as if it were gold, and casually mentioned that further inland there was a hill that sometimes glowed at night, even though there was no village nearby.

"Maybe they have a cult there," one person said.

“Maybe not,” said another, and drank.

Beowulf listened, but pretended he was only interested in the fish in the bowl.

Then a hunter, who had been traveling in the east in late autumn, higher in the hills, recounted seeing an old, half-collapsed burial site, stone upon stone, overgrown, forgotten. "There was a warm wind," the man said, "but no sun. And the ground vibrated, as if a very large animal were snoring somewhere beneath it."

The others laughed at him. "You had too much of your own beer with you," one of them shouted.

Beowulf didn't laugh. He knew the vibration of things that sleep and yet still work. He also knew men who drank too much and still spat out truths, because the gods sometimes allowed themselves a bit of fun.

On nights when the fire mountain drew closer in his dreams, he could sometimes see more now. Not just the slope and the red gold. Sometimes he saw something like a passage leading into the depths, and at the end of it, metal—piles of metal, like frozen sun. On top of it and among it, something dark that only briefly raised its head before he awoke.

"Perhaps you're just getting old," Wulfgar said when he told him this once. "Old men dream of things bigger than themselves. Gods, dragons, giant fish. The bones tell each other stories so they don't just crack."

“My bones have other hobbies,” Beowulf grumbled. “This is coming from somewhere else.”

The quiet years dragged on like thick honey. Some days he really thought that perhaps the noise in his head was just a side effect of old age. Then some harmless sentence would come along and burrow into his ear like moths into wool.

An old man from a distant village, standing before the winter stores that the king was to inspect, said casually: “We have enough. More than enough. Looking at it, I almost think we are a dragon lying on its stores.”

The others laughed, banged on barrels and sacks, and made jokes about fat dragons with grain bellies. Beowulf felt a chill run down his spine at the word "dragon," even though the fire was burning behind him.

Dragons were the stuff of stories. Like sea monsters, like giants, like gods who could fit through doorways. People talked about them around the fire when the mead was too strong and the night too long. But the word stuck to his ear like damp smoke. Dragon. Fire mountain. Gold. They were building blocks that wanted to assemble into something no one in the courtyard wanted to see.

The silence outside remained. A few years without major tragedies. No king died. No great enemy knocked at the door. Just small things: a wolf that killed sheep; a young warrior who fell from a roof during a bet and broke his neck. The usual.

During these years, the hall changed even more. New faces arrived – men who had heard somewhere outside that at Beowulf's, the halls were warm and the tables reasonably full. They wanted to serve under someone like that, someone who had stories featuring real monsters, not just neighbors with overly long knives.

"You attract them like moths to a flame," Eadgils murmured.

“I am not fire,” said Beowulf.

“No,” replied the old man. “You are the stain behind the fire they look at when they want to suppress their own fear.”

There was something insulting about the way they still looked at him as if he were a guarantee. In his mind, nothing had been guaranteed for a long time. He knew how quickly a king could end up lying in a meadow. He knew how fickle the sea was. He knew that a bit of metal and stone at the border only meant "protection" as long as no one seriously ran into it.

When he stood out on the rampart at night, he didn't just hear the sea. He also heard the silence beyond the hills. It's a special kind of silence, when the world outside pretends there's nothing there that has any interest in what's inside. It's like a burglar standing outside your cabin, breathing so quietly you think you're being paranoid.

"You're sleeping even less," Wulfgar remarked at one point.

"The dead talk a lot," said Beowulf.

"They've been dead for a while now. Can't they just shut up?"

“Not while I am still breathing,” Beowulf replied. “I am their last listener. When I am gone, they will only have the gods. And I do not trust the gods to listen well.”

With the calm came illness. Not as a great plague sweeping across the land, but as a persistent, small wave. The elderly grew thin more quickly, the young developed fevers that

lasted longer than usual. Nothing that would have torn the empire apart, but enough to show that one could die even without a spear in one's gut.

He visited a few of the huts, where conditions were even worse. Shriveled bodies lying on straw mattresses, eyes that were already more advanced than the rest of the body. And again and again the same question: "Lord, was it worth it?"

They didn't confront her directly. But she hung in the rooms. Was it worth the price—all the dead, the battles, the wounds—if in the end an old body lay in a stinking shack, its lungs sounding like an old bellows?

Beowulf never had an answer for that. He brought meat, he brought wood, he sometimes brought a healer. He couldn't carry any more than that.

The quiet years threw him back on what one says about a man when the big stories are on hold: how he behaves when no one is watching.

He helped carry wood when his back allowed. He sat with an old soldier who had lost a leg in the war and was now in more pain than he deserved. He yelled at a young man who had beaten his wife because there wasn't enough bread, making it clear that you don't solve problems with your fists if you've caused them with your head.

Petty crap. Daily shit. Royal filth that never makes it into songs.

But even in those moments he heard that different breathing. Strange, yet familiar. In his dreams, of course. But sometimes during the day too, when the wind was blowing the wrong way, the farmyard briefly quieted down, the sounds reduced to hammers, footsteps, pigs. Then there was that very deep, regular "Huuuh… Haaah…", which seemed to lie somewhere beyond the hills.

“You hear things,” Eadgils diagnosed dryly when Beowulf once hinted at it.

“I’ve spent my life hearing things before they’re over the water,” Beowulf growled. “It’s saved our asses a few times.”

"Maybe this time too," said the Grey One. "Or it'll just drive you crazy. But honestly, I don't see much of a difference between the two anymore."

The quiet years held one last trick: they almost made him believe that the big bang might not come after all. You get used to everything. Even to falling asleep every night with noise in your head and waking up every morning without any noise outside.

He began to say things like, "Maybe nothing more will come." Not aloud. Just in that inner corner where hope sits like a half-frozen bird.

"Perhaps the lake was the greatest thing," he sometimes thought. "Perhaps Huglac's fall was the great miscalculation. Perhaps I was made to defeat monsters in the water and carry the rich through lazy years. Perhaps that's enough."

But the dreams contradicted this. One night he saw the Fire Mountain very close. No meandering, no mist. Just rock, entrance, embers. And then something raised its head. Two

eyes like two golden knives. Not a human pupil, not an animal he recognized. Something that looked at him as if it had carried his name in its mouth for a hundred years.

“Beowulf,” it didn’t say. But it heard the sound of its own name in that look.

He woke up as if he'd been hit. His heart was racing, his back was wet, the blanket stuck to his skin. He sat up, ran a hand over his face as if he could wipe away the dream.

Wulfgar, who was no longer sleeping like a baby, lifted his head in the darkness. "The mountain again?" he asked.

“Yes,” said Beowulf.

"That thing again?"

“This time closer,” Beowulf replied. “And this time it saw me.”

Wulfgar was silent for a moment. "Perhaps it just wants to say hello," he then said.

"Dragons don't greet," growled Beowulf.

"You yourself always say that dragons are stories."

"Stories can burn," said Beowulf. "Ask the people of Herot."

He stood up, walked barefoot through the hall, felt the cold floorboards beneath his feet. He went outside, into the night, which was as dark as an old dog's mouth. The air was cold and clear, the sea murmured in the distance, nothing burned, nothing glowed.

And yet he smelled something. Not really, more like how you sometimes "smell" a thought. A hint of metal that had lain too long in the embers. Of stone that had seen heat. A shadow of smoke carried by the wind from somewhere, from a direction where nothing much should have been.

He stood there, his arms wrapped around his body, not from the cold, but because something inside him needed to be held back that would otherwise have run away. He thought of the boys in the courtyard, the men at the border, the old women in their huts, the children who still believed that the worst thing that could happen was a messed-up evening porridge.

"Quiet years," he murmured. "You are merely the stillness in which something back there fills the lungs."

The next day he did what kings do in quiet years. He checked supplies, argued with a minor prince about a damned forest, and listened to a bard sing an old song about him, in which he was younger, stronger, and dumber than he could remember.

But inwardly, he'd reached the point where he knew: the pause was over. Nothing had happened yet, there was no smoke in the sky, the messengers were still arriving with their usual problems. But the tone had changed. Like just before a thunderstorm, when even the pigs suddenly become nervous for no apparent reason.

Those quiet years would go down in songs as a time of peace. No one would bother to describe the sound that had been in their head. That was okay. Songs are for those who aren't old yet.

Beowulf was old. He lived among young corpses and old dreams. And somewhere, beyond hills, forests, and a few ridiculous boundary stones, something was turning in its sleep.

The whisper from the Fire Mountain had not yet begun. But its echo was already there.

CHAPTER 19 – Whispers from the Fire Mountain

It started, as always, with a damned noise no one wanted to hear. Nothing loud. No divine thunderclap, no horn from heaven, no voice saying, "Watch out, you idiots." More like a deep murmur in the background, which you mistake for the earth's stomach growling, until you realize it continues to rumble in your head long after the ground has fallen silent again.

The first person to mention it was a shepherd, and shepherds are always suspect. People who spend too much time alone with animals eventually start believing things that aren't there. The man stood in the hall, hat in hand, rain on his shoulders, looking as if he were half ashamed to have shown up at all.

“Up there in the hills,” he began, “where nobody grows anything anymore because the soil is too stony… sometimes it hums.”

“It hums,” repeated Beowulf, who sat on the chair as if he had grown together with it. “Like a bear? Like a horn? Like your head after too much mead?”

The shepherd involuntarily grimaced, unsure whether he was allowed to laugh. “Not like animals, sir. Deeper. As if the earth were coughing. And sometimes the ground is warm when I want to move the sheep to another pasture. But it’s no fire, nothing to see, just this…” He made a helpless gesture with his hand, as if he could hold the sound between his fingers. “…this humming sound.”

“Perhaps a god is sleeping there,” one of the younger ones called out, half-aloud and already half-laughing.

“If a god is asleep,” growled another, “he should turn around and go back to sleep. We have enough to do with the awake ones.”

Beowulf gazed at the shepherd for a long time. No wild eyes, no exaggerated gestures. Just a man too close to something that made him nervous, and far enough away from the mead to be able to describe it properly.

"Where exactly?" asked Beowulf.

The shepherd looked surprised, as if he had expected to be laughed at and then sent back out into the rain. "Northeast," he said. "Two days from here, if you know the hills. An old hill, sir. The kind of thing the gods left behind when they were handing out the mountains. Rocks, a

few crooked trees on top, nowhere you'd want to sit. There used to be nothing there. Now... it sometimes buzzes. And the sheep won't go near it anymore."

"Sheep always notice everything first," Wulfgar muttered from the side. "It would be better if we had them as advisors."

Eadgils the Grey stood beside the chair, as was his habit: always close to where decisions were made, but never so close that he had to intervene if someone suddenly came with an axe. He looked at Beowulf with that look that asked, "Should we bother?"

Beowulf paused briefly, listening to his own thoughts. There it was again, that deep, slow breathing that didn't originate from his chest. It suited what the shepherd was saying, like a second note to a song one hates.

"Maybe it's just a cave suspended in the air," one said.

“Or the mountain is slowly collapsing,” said another person, offering a plausible explanation that he himself did not believe.

Beowulf stood up. His knees cracked, but the hall pretended not to hear. "When the earth coughs," he said, "I want to know if it has only swallowed a crumb or if it is about to spit us out."

Some laughed, out of habit. Some didn't.

“Wulfgar,” he said, “you come with me. Three more men who don’t immediately start seeing gods when the wind blows at an odd angle. The shepherd will show us the way.”

“Sir,” the grey one interjected, half warning, half testing, “you don’t have to go there yourself. You can also…”

“…staying seated and having someone else tell me the story,” Beowulf interrupted. “I’ve done that all my life, and every time I’ve done it, something’s come back to bite me. I’m not going far. I’m just looking at a hill.”

"Hills," grunted Wulfgar. "That's how all your best stories begin."

They set off the next morning. No large contingent, no banners, no baggage train that looked as if it were trying to impress a foreign king. Just a small group: Beowulf, Wulfgar, two younger warriors with more shoulders than sense, and the shepherd as their guide. The rain accompanied them in fine threads, not enough to be truly bothersome, but sufficient to make everything damp.

The land changed the further they rode. The fields became fewer, the villages smaller, the roads narrow to paths, and the paths eventually became mere guesswork between bushes and stones. Not many people lived here anymore. And those who did looked at them as if wondering whether the kingdom truly extended this far, or whether it was just an idea from the hall.

“Are you sure you know the way?” Wulfgar asked the shepherd as they climbed a steep slope where the horses were slipping.

“I know the hill,” the man said. “I only remember the way there each time when I set off.”

"That's incredibly reassuring," grumbled Wulfgar.

Beowulf was silent. He listened. No humming, nothing unusual. Only wind rustling through stunted trees, the snorting of horses, the occasional curse from one of the boys as they stepped into a hole.

"There."

The shepherd stopped and pointed ahead. The hill lay before them, not particularly high, but with a kind of presence that had little to do with size. A broad ridge of rock and earth, its slopes scarred by old landslides and cracks, a few twisted trees at the top that looked as if they had tried to flee and frozen mid-movement.

Up close, you could see that the ground was darker in some places, as if it had been exposed to more heat than its surroundings. No smoke, no fire. Just this… waiting.

"Here?" Wulfgar asked skeptically. "Looks like any ugly hill in the middle of nowhere."

"Wait," murmured the shepherd.

They waited. At first nothing happened, and Beowulf briefly thought how silly it was: five men standing on a hillside hoping for a sound that would frighten them.

Then he felt it. Not with his ears first, but with his knees. A slight tremor, like the trembling of a hand just before a blow. The floor vibrated, so subtly that it could easily have been ignored if one weren't standing perfectly still.

“There,” said the shepherd, quietly.

Then came the sound. Deep, far below, as if someone were drawing air back and forth in a massive chest cavity. It wasn't an earthquake, not thunder. More like a long, drawn-out, dull "Hhhmmmm" that crept through my feet and into my bones, where it lingered.

The horses became nervous, pawing the ground and tossing their heads, as if they had suddenly realized they didn't belong there. One of the younger men cursed and struggled to hold his horse.

“Perhaps it’s an underground spring,” Wulfgar managed to say, but his voice sounded as if he were insulting himself for trying.

Beowulf rode a little closer to the hill. He placed a hand on the ground, braced himself, and felt the vibration in his palm. Warm. Not hot, but warmer than the air.

In his mind, the image of the volcano from his dreams overlapped with reality. The angle was wrong, the size was wrong too – but the feeling was. That feeling of standing on the edge of something that was more than just rock.

"We're not going any closer," he finally said.

One of the boys looked at him in surprise. "But sir – shouldn't we…?"

"What? Go in, if there's a door? Knock and ask if anyone's home?" Beowulf straightened up, his hand still on the ground. "If something's sleeping down there, it's just noticed us, just as we have. That's enough for me today."

Wulfgar nodded slowly. "You think it is...?"

“I think the stories were, as always, both right and wrong at the same time,” Beowulf interrupted. “They exaggerate the details and downplay the danger.”

The sound subsided. The vibration weakened until it ceased altogether. The hill lay silent before them once more, as if nothing had ever happened. Only the horses remained nervous, their ears pricked, their nostrils flared.

“I want you to remember everything,” Beowulf told the men. “The sound, the trembling, the smell of the air. But I don’t want you chattering in the hall about dragons as if we saw one. We heard a mound. Nothing more, nothing less.”

On the way back, no one talked much. The shepherd seemed relieved, not because the thing had stopped humming, but because now others knew it had been there. Fear is easier when you can share it.

When they reached the hall again, the day was already off-key; the light had that tired quality that only late afternoons possess. The men approached them, wanting to hear if there was anything to fight over.

"A hill," said Wulfgar tersely. "It trembles. And it rumbles. And if any of you want to sit on it for fun, you'll have to bring your own kingdom."

They laughed, but not quite as loudly as they usually would have.

Beowulf sat down on the chair, his cloak still around his shoulders, dirt from the hills clinging to his boots. His mind continued to vibrate, even though the ground here was still.

Whispers from the Fire Mountain, he thought. Not yet a scream. Not yet a fire. But definitely a hello.

"And?" Eadgils asked later, when they were alone. "What was it?"

Beowulf looked at him, tired but clear. "Something large enough not to need us yet," he said. "But small enough to move."

"Is it a threat?"

“Not yet,” Beowulf replied. “Right now it’s a sound. But sounds become footsteps. And footsteps become flames. I want watchmen in the area. Not every day. Irregularly. Like a dog stalking around a hole in the garden, pretending not to look.”

"So you think it is..."

“I think we’ll have to call a spade a spade,” Beowulf interrupted. “But until we do, save your words.”

That night, the fire mountain reappeared in the dream. Only this time, it didn't just glow. It flickered. And deep within, between gold and shadow, something briefly raised its head, like someone half-awake checking if anyone was in the room.

It looked at him. No words. Just that silent understanding between two things that know their paths will eventually cross.

Beowulf awoke with the taste of metal in his mouth, as if he had licked a red-hot sword. Outside, the night was still. Inside, his head was loud.

The years of silence were officially over. Not for the Reich. For him.

Sounds have the annoying habit of repeating themselves once they've entered your mind. Ever since the hill ride, Beowulf heard the sound, even when it wasn't there. He sat in the hall, and somewhere between the clinking of cups and the murmuring of the men, that deep "Hhhmmm" crept through, as if someone were snoring in the earth beneath the table.

He wasn't the only one who noticed something. The first signs didn't come with screams, but with small shifts in daily life that could easily be overlooked if one wanted to.

A few hunters returned, paler than usual, even though their bags were full. They told of slopes where the moss looked scorched, as if someone had been poking at it with red-hot hands. No fire, no smoke. Just black edges on stones that had always been gray.

A farmer from a remote hamlet stood in his yard one morning, still smelling of the barn before he opened his mouth. "The cows no longer calve near the hills at night," he said. "They break free if you drive them there. The old folks say it was like that once before, a very long time ago. I don't know anyone who lives that long, so I don't know what that means."

"They say that animals are smarter than we are," Wulfgar murmured.

"Were you there again?" Eadgils asked later.

“I have better things to do than make small talk with hills,” Beowulf growled. “But the sentries were out, as I said. Irregularly. They came back. For now.”

The reports all looked the same when stripped down: "Sometimes the floor vibrates. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the air is warm. Sometimes cold. It hums. Then it stops."

"Perhaps it's just a capricious rock," said one of the younger ones when the news was read out in the hall.

"There are no capricious rocks," Beowulf said dryly. "There are only rocks and idiots who get too close to them."

The others laughed, but it sounded strained.

At night he stayed awake longer than was healthy. Sleep came in short bursts, as if someone were standing next to him with a bucket of cold water, ready to throw it in his face just as he was about to drift off peacefully. In the pauses between, he listened. The courtyard, the hall, his own head.

The Fire Mountain was no longer just a figure in his dreams. It was a direction. Northeast. A two-day ride. A specific hill. He could point to it on the map, this spot that had previously meant only "rocks, dung, bad hunting." Now it was a hole in the surface of reality.

“We should close off the area,” Wulfgar said one evening, as the two of them stood by the wall. “No herds, no hunters, no one who dares to get too close out of stupidity.”

“Closure is the best advertising,” Beowulf replied. “Tell people not to go somewhere, and tomorrow half the village will be there with torches to see what they’re missing.”

"So do nothing?"

“We’re doing what we can.” Beowulf rested his hands on the wall, feeling the rough wood beneath his fingers. “We’re watching. We’re listening. We’re not sending any heroes who desperately need to prove they’re heroes. And we’re praying that thing down there ignores us for a while longer.”

"And what if it doesn't ignore us?"

Beowulf gazed out into the night. It was clear, but empty. No fire, no smoke, only stars too far away to care about. "Then this has all been just a rehearsal," he said.

He noticed a shift in the atmosphere of the hall. As soon as the word "hill" was mentioned, some voices fell silent. No one spoke of "dragon." Not yet. But it hung in the air like the scent of rain before the first drop falls.

The bards were the first to play with it. Of course. They're like crows – if something glitters, they fly right up to it.

One of them, a thin bastard with overly large eyes, sang a new song one evening. It began innocently enough: men fighting in the distance, a king sitting on his throne, a hall where the smoke always followed the same path. Then came a new verse.

“And deep in the hills,” he sang, “there’s an old stone humming, as if it wanted to remember: ‘I was once more than yours.’”

The hall laughed, some nervously, some genuinely, because the rhythm was good and the mead was already taking effect. But Beowulf saw individual heads turn up. Because they had heard it too. Or because they wanted to hear it.

After the song, he pulled the bard towards him. "Don't sing about it as if it were a joke," he said softly.

“People need something to laugh about,” replied the singer, a little too defiantly for his stature.

“Then tell them your own mistakes,” Beowulf growled. “Not the noises that might one day burn them up.”

The bard swallowed, nodded, and pulled away. Songs are weapons. He knew that.

While nothing "big" happened outside, things happened inside Beowulf that had no visible enemy. He often forgot names. Not those of the dead. Those remained seared into his memory. But those of the boys who were still alive. He mixed them up, had to ask around, and felt older than his bones already indicated.

“There are too many,” he said to Eadgils at one point. “Too many faces, too many voices, too many coming and going. I can’t remember everyone anymore.”

“You are a king, not a shepherd,” replied the Grey One.

"Sometimes it seems like it's the same job," muttered Beowulf. "Except my sheep have swords."

At the same time, he defended each and every one of them whenever anyone in the council meetings was too careless with human lives. He no longer had a problem distributing rings, shifting land, or redistributing supplies. But if someone said, "Then we'll just send three squads; half will come back," his voice turned cold.

“When I’m old,” he once said in the middle of such a discussion, “I want those who are going to replace me to still have enough fingers to hold a sword. So stop planning them like logs.”

For the time being, the volcano remained merely background noise in their shared life. Occasionally, a sentence would be heard: "There's no fire burning up there, but the nights are mild." Or: "The snow doesn't stick there, even though the wind carries it." Or: "The crows fly a wide berth around it."

Always little things. Never enough to cause panic. Always enough to keep Beowulf's mind sharp.

“You’re becoming more paranoid,” Wulfgar observed, as they stood in the yard one morning eyeing a sack of grain as if it might explode.

“I will be more precise,” said Beowulf. “Paranoia is just precision without pause.”

Sometimes he thought about going to the hill again alone. Without guards, without shepherds. Just him and the thing beneath it.

"And then?" he asked himself. "Do you want to knock on the gate and say, 'I'm the one who might have to kill you later, just so we can have met'?"

He left it be. Not out of fear of the thing itself. Out of a certain weary politeness. If something was asleep, it should stay asleep. Enough things had already woken up too soon in his life.

Even the dreams changed the rhythm. Before, the Fire Mountain only appeared when he was particularly tired, after hard days, after lots of mead. Now it also appeared after quiet days.

After those when he had only talked about grain, wood, and rain. As if the thing had figured out that the best time to whisper is when the mind believes it's finally off work.

In one of these dreams, he was closer than ever before. He was no longer standing on the slope. He was standing inside. Rock that looked as if it had been licked by fire from within. Mountains of gold, not neatly stacked, but thrown together as if by a blind hand. And in the middle, a body, curled up, scales like dark metal lying in the embers.

The breathing was no longer just audible, it was palpable. Each breath was as if the rock itself were moving with it. In, out. In, out.

Beowulf stood there, naked, without armor, without a sword. He looked down at himself and thought in his dream: "Of course. If it has to be done, then it has to be like this."

The thing moved. No dramatic cry, no sudden righting. Just a slight turning, like a man rolling onto his other side in bed. Gold coins, chains, and cups slid out. And a little fire glimmered from the animal's nostrils, so little that it seemed almost tender.

Then it opened one eye.

It was as if someone had hung another shard of sunlight into the room. Golden yellow, deep pupil, merciless, unhurried. It looked at him. Not angrily, not surprised. More like scrutinizingly.

Beowulf returned the gaze. He was old, even in his dreams. No illusion of youth. No flashbacks. He stood there as he was: worn out, scarred, king of a land that was slowly realizing its peace was only borrowed.

"Well," he said in the dream, or at least he thought he had said it. "Then we've been introduced."

The eye didn't blink. It just kept breathing. In, out. The fire in the depths flickered.

He woke up before the thing did anything. Not with a scream. Just with his eyes open, as if someone had given him a gentle push.

The morning was grey, the farmyard normal, the pigs hungry, the men tired.

"You smell of smoke," said Wulfgar, as they stood next to each other.

“I dreamt of fire,” said Beowulf.

"In the hall?"

"In the belly of the earth."

Wulfgar snorted. "Maybe she wants you back," he said.

"She had enough chances," said Beowulf.

The day passed like most: men at the wall, women at work, children in the dirt, a king amidst problems, all smaller than the image in his head, yet still big enough to fill everyday life.

But beneath it all lay a whisper. It wasn't a sound you could catch with your ear. More like a constant knowing, like the taste of iron after you've bitten your tongue.

Something had moved. Something had returned his gaze.

The volcano was no longer just a direction on the map. It was an opposite. And the whisper that came from there was nothing other than the way the future says "I'm coming" without raising its voice.

Beowulf made his way through the courtyard, over the rampart, through the hall. He spoke with messengers, farmers, and warriors. He laughed, he cursed, he drank. And somewhere deep inside, he heard that soft, patient breathing.

Everything was still intact. Nothing was burning yet. The hills were still just hills and the fields just fields.

But he had seen enough monsters to know: No sound remains a whisper forever.

It wasn't long before the whispers took on a color. At first, it was just sound, vibration, a dull hum that ran through bones and stories. Then smoke joined it. Not that honest smoke of wood and grease that rises from every hall when people pretend to be well-fed and immortal. A different kind. Thinner. Stranger.

The first to tell the tale wasn't a shepherd or a hunter, but a small-time merchant with a crooked back and more blisters on his feet than teeth in his mouth. He stood in the hall, holding his cap before him like a shield, and it was clear he wasn't used to standing before a king. Before anyone who had the right to say, "I decide."

“Sir,” he began, his voice too high for his height, “I come from the villages behind the hills in the northeast. They say you already know about the humming.”

A murmur went through the hall. That's how it is with rumors: you consider them local until someone from elsewhere says them in the same words.

Beowulf nodded. "I've heard about it," he said. It sounded like he was saying, "I've thrown up before, too." Just an observation.

“Sometimes,” the merchant continued, “there’s a fine dust on the roofs in the morning. Not like ashes from the hearth. Grayer. Thicker. If you rub it between your fingers, it stings a little. Not much. But it reddens the skin. And…” He swallowed, glanced briefly between his feet, as if that were where the courage he needed lay. “…sometimes the air smells as if someone had been heating iron, even though no one had lit the forge.”

“And you come to me,” Beowulf grumbled, “instead of simply moving somewhere else.”

A few laughed, relieved. The merchant didn't. "It's our land," he said quietly. "The fields, the farms, the graves. Where are we supposed to go? And if the earth decides to move, then at least I want the one who is king to know about it."

Beowulf looked at him and suddenly liked him. Not because he was brave. Because he seemed so tired, yet he stood upright.

"Good," he said. "Now I've heard it."

After the man, others came. Not all into the hall, not all with words. Some messages came in the form of things. A stone someone brought, blackened on one side, as if the fire had only briefly brushed its teeth against it. A piece of wood from a tree on the hillside, half-charred, even though no lightning had struck anywhere nearby. A dead crow, its feathers singed at the tips, even though no one had set it on fire.

“Maybe heaven hated her,” one person suggested.

"When the sky starts burning birds one by one, we have other worries," growled Beowulf.

The whisper from the Fire Mountain remained invisible, but it grew stronger. More people knew the story; more had heard, seen, or smelled something. It was like a disease that didn't yet have a name, but was already causing a fever.

They discussed it frequently in the council.

“We should get those people out of there,” one said. “Put them under our protection. Clear the area so that whatever is down there has nothing to eat.”

“We don’t have enough land for those we’re already feeding,” replied the Grey. “And if you burn an empty space into the map, others immediately run for it. Robbers, would-be rulers, chatterers. The earth doesn’t create gaps without someone getting the idea to fill them.”

Beowulf listened, elbow on the table, head in his hand. The voices flowed past him like water, but individual phrases lingered. "Empty it." "Protect it." "Too dangerous." Words from people who still acted as if they had some influence over something that breathed beneath stone.

“There is another possibility,” said a man who until then had only been noticed for his ability to nod at the right moments. “We could open the hill.”

The silence that followed was heavier than all the talk before the sentence.

"Open it," Beowulf repeated. "With what? Spoons? Your own teeth?"

“With men,” the other said. “With tools. With fire. If there’s something there, then we can…” He searched for a word that was neither “kill” nor “get rid of.” “…fix it before it gets big.”

Wulfgar gave a short, bitter laugh. "All my life I've seen what happens when we try to 'fix' things bigger than our brains," he said. "In the end, you're lying in the dirt and someone's singing about you. That's all."

“If we wait,” the man insisted, “it will only get worse. You say so yourselves, you can hear it. We usually send men out when something is wrong somewhere.”

All eyes turned to Beowulf. He felt his gaze like a second suit of armor.

He thought of the lake. Of the cave beneath the water, of the green light that had consumed him. He thought of the mother who came from the depths when someone thought she was just a story. He thought of the difference in sound between things that are asleep and things that are awake.

“We won’t open the hill,” he said finally. “Not yet. We’re not gods. We struggle to keep our own roof closed. If something’s sleeping down there, it’s managed without us long enough. We’ll keep an eye on it. But we’re not going to scratch at its door just to prove we’ve got balls.”

Some of the men looked relieved. Others disappointed. There are always some who absolutely have to go to the edge, just to see if he's really there.

Eadgils stayed after the meeting. “You’re right,” he said. “But eventually someone will go, whether you order them to or forbid it. People are too stupid to leave things alone that they don’t understand.”

“I know,” said Beowulf. “That’s why I want it to be an idiot that no one will miss. Not a whole troop.”

They laughed briefly, harshly, because it was easier than admitting that they both knew how it would end: One leaves, doesn't come back, and the rest follow – with torches, with greed, with fear.

The nights grew brighter. Not in the hall, not in the courtyard. In his dreams. The fire mountain glowed now, as if beneath it lay a forge that never ceased. Sometimes he saw figures flitting around the entrance—shadows of people. Thin, greedy, small compared to the rock.

Once, in a dream, he saw one of them up close. A man with the face of a boy he didn't know, and the gait of someone who had escaped capture far too often. He saw the man crawl through a crack in the rock that looked like a mouth opened too wide. In his hand, he held something that glittered in the darkness: a cup, a ring, something like the ones Beowulf had seen passed from hand to hand all his life.

The man disappeared into the belly of the mountain. A moment later, in a dream, Beowulf heard this breathing louder than ever before. It was as if someone were taking a breath near his ear. Slowly. Annoyedly.

“There we have it,” he said in the dream to no one in particular. “Someone couldn’t keep their finger to themselves.”

He woke up with a feeling worse than fear. Certainty.

The next day, the messengers were faster than the coffee in his head. One of the guards from the northeastern perimeter was in the courtyard even before Beowulf had properly sat down in his chair.

“Sir,” the man said without hesitation, “there is a lack of gold in the villages near the hill.”

"Gold is always lacking somewhere," murmured Beowulf. "That's the meaning of gold."

“This time it’s not just the people,” said the messenger. “They say one of their own left during the night. Towards the hills. He didn’t come back. But since then…”

"Since what?"

The man swallowed. "Since then, it no longer hums. It screams."

Beowulf sensed the sentence travel through the hall before the others fully understood it. Sounds change. A whisper that turns into a growl is never a good sign.

“How does it ‘scream’?” asked Wulfgar, who was standing next to it.

"The ground is jerking," said the messenger. "Not just a tremor, a jolt. Rocks have slipped. A few slopes have moved. And at night you can sometimes see light now. Red. As if someone were stoking the embers deep inside."

"And the man? The one who left."

“They say he was one of those who never came home empty-handed,” said the messenger. “They say he took something that wasn’t his. They say…” He paused briefly, as if he knew how crazy it sounded when said aloud. “…they say he stole something from the mountain.”

Whispers from the Fire Mountain, thought Beowulf. The whispering had stopped. Now the mountain began to grind its teeth.

“Send messengers to all the nearby farms,” he said. “They are not to leave anything outside at night that can walk. People, livestock, gold. No camps on the hillside, no sheep in the upper pastures. If anything glows at night, they are not to go near it. If the ground shakes, they are to get out of their houses. And if anyone claims they ‘just want to have a look’ – tie them up.”

“Sir,” one of them interjected, “what do we tell them it is?”

Beowulf looked around at the men, hoping for answers that would soothe them. He had none. Just an old story in a new guise.

“Tell them the mountain has fallen ill,” he said. “Tell them something has awakened within it that should have remained asleep. And tell them to keep their mouths shut when they think the word ‘dragon’.”

The hall murmured. The word hung in the air, even though no one said it aloud.

That night he dreamed of the cave again. The gold was in motion. Not because hands were rummaging in it, but because something lay beneath it that was now truly turning. Scales rubbed against metal, fire flickered from a mouth that hadn't yet fully opened.

This time he said nothing. He stood there, old, scarred, and knew that all those years with iron and fear had only been a test. The noise in his head was suddenly still, as if making room for something greater.

When he woke up, he knew two things. First: The fire mountain was no longer a metaphor. Second: The coming period would not only be about hills that hummed.

Outside, morning was just beginning; the world was still acting as if everything were normal. Pigs, wood, water, voices.

Beowulf sat on the edge of the bed, ran his hand over his face and laughed briefly, roughly, without joy.

"Well then," he muttered. "The dragon turns in its sleep."

And somewhere, deep beneath stone and gold, that did something.

CHAPTER 20 – The Dragon Turns in His Sleep

It was as if someone had kicked the Earth in the back and it had decided to turn over in bed. Except that the people on top of the mattress were living, building, fucking, sleeping, and pretending they had everything under control.

The first real jolt came that night, when the wind was unusually still. No howling at the corners of the hall, no rattling from poorly hung shutters. Just this dull, solid "thump" that came from far away, but still went straight to the ribs.

Beowulf wasn't asleep when it happened. Sleep, in any case, was something he only possessed in fragments. He sat half-dressed on the edge of his camp, the cup in his hand, which had been empty for some time, staring at the embers in the hearth, which looked like a small, tired sibling of the thing in his dreams.

When the jolt came, the bowl beside his bed vibrated. A thin metal rim—it trembled as if someone had flicked it with a finger. A few sparks jumped from the embers, as if startled. The walls creaked, but nothing broke.

"Did you hear that?" Wulfgar jerked his head up from the other side of the hall, where he lay like a dog that was always half awake.

"If I hadn't heard it, I would finally be dead," growled Beowulf.

Out in the yard, shouting began. Not panic, more like the excited, confused shrieking of people who had been jolted awake and didn't yet know whether to flee or fart. Chickens flapped, dogs barked, and some idiot immediately yelled "Fire!" even though there wasn't a fire in sight.

Beowulf stood up, his bones protesting as they did every morning and night, but he was on his feet faster than his body wanted to admit. He hobbled to the door, flung it open, and stepped out into the cold.

The sky was clear. Stars like tiny holes in a dark blanket. No smoke, no light, nothing burning. Only the courtyard, men with furs over their bare shoulders, women grabbing children as if arrows were falling from the sky, even though reality had only momentarily trembled.

"Stay where you are," Beowulf roared, his voice rough but clear enough to silence the first screams. "The halls still stand, the sky isn't falling, and even if it were, we'd have bigger problems than your bare feet."

A few people laughed nervously. It wasn't a good joke, but better than no joke at all.

The ground calmed down. The trembling was gone. Only a sensation lingered in the bones, like the buzzing after a blow to the face.

A guard from the wall ran towards her, his cloak half open, his breath coming in rapid gasps. "Sir! Towards the northeast – it… it was shining."

Beowulf knew what the man meant even before he had finished speaking.

"How did it shine?"

"As if... as if someone had started a fire underground," the watchman stammered. "No lightning. No village. A glimmer on the horizon. Red. And then gone again."

The crowd murmured. A few signs of the cross, a few old curses, a few men reflexively groping for the hilts of their swords, as if the metal could protect them against things that dwelt beneath the rock.

Beowulf looked in the direction the watchman had indicated. He saw nothing, of course. It was too far away. But in his mind, the image was clear: a hill glowing, as if the underworld felt the need to breathe through the skin.

"Go back to sleep, if you can," he said to the courtyard. "Or at least pretend to. Tomorrow morning the same shit will look different after you've had a few moments of peace."

"And what if it wobbles again?" someone shouted.

"So what if it wobbles?" growled Beowulf. "Hold on to something that won't run away—even if it's just your own tail."

Laughter. This time more serious. Men need obscene sayings like they need armor.

He stayed outside for a while longer as the courtyard slowly emptied. Some went into the hall, others into their huts, a few still stood smoking under the open sky, as if they could protect themselves with the vapor from their mouths.

Wulfgar stepped beside him. "The dragon turns in its sleep," he said.

Beowulf snorted. "I said that line when it was still funny," he muttered.

"Does this seem like a joke to you?"

“I stopped laughing when the ground laughed along,” Beowulf replied.

In the morning, the messengers were faster than the frost.

A man from a village closer to the hills had just completed the ride of his life. The horse was half-done, and so was the man. He staggered more than he kicked as they led him into the hall.

“Speak,” said Beowulf, even before the man opened his mouth.

"The slope has collapsed," the messenger managed. "Not completely. But pieces of it. Rock that was previously solid has slid down. A few huts..." He made a shallow, downward motion with his hand. "...no longer there. They say the hill shook itself like a dog after the rain."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Not many. Yet."

The word "still" hung in the air like a threat.

Beowulf felt the hall waiting for him. Hell, it always waited for him, but now it was worse. It wasn't just the eyes. It was that unspoken wager hanging in the air: "Let's see if he still knows how to breathe when something bigger than our stupid problems comes along."

“We’re sending help,” he said. “Wood, men, healers. Not heroes. I don’t want to see anyone there who thinks they have to argue with the mountain.”

Later, in the small, stuffy room behind the hall, they pored over the map. Eadgils, his thin fingers tracing the lines as if he could feel cracks in the parchment. Wulfgar, relying more on Beowulf's expressions than on the drawing.

"If the slope breaks," said the Grey One, "it can swallow roads, divert streams, wipe entire villages off the map. Even without a dragon. Even just as earth."

“But there’s more,” Beowulf murmured. “You know it, I know it, the pigs in the yard know it. They’ve been acting more nervous for two days now, as if they’ve understood that someone will soon be sharing their food with them.”

“Are you calling it by its name?” Eadgils asked cautiously.

Beowulf looked at him, long, hard. "I swore to myself I'd only use the word when I see more than light and hum," he said. "Because I know what a word can do to people's minds. But I've seen too much fire in my life that didn't come from our hearths. So yes. Deep down, the thing already has a name."

"And outside?"

"Outside, it's still called a hill," he growled. "As long as we call it that, they won't all run into the abyss at the same time."

The next few days were strange. Like a storm rumbling in the distance, and no one knew whether it would stay the course or change direction. Daily life went on – pigs, wood, arguments, mead. But everything was thinner, as if diluted with water.

Messengers from the northeast brought new fragments every day:

"A stream turned brown without rain." – "A rock split even though no one touched it." – "At night, the hillside glowed as if someone had placed glowing coals on it."

And then there were the stories of the dreams. Beowulf wasn't the only one who dreamed of fire. Others did too. A farmer recounted seeing a mountain open and a glowing breath pass over his fields without touching them. A woman said she dreamed of gold she couldn't wear because it burned her hands.

"Dreams are contagious," said Eadgils. "One person starts, the rest follow."

“Dreams are just messages that don’t want to stay in one place,” Beowulf grumbled.

Perhaps they were just figments of the imagination. Perhaps it was also the first breath that gathered under the stone, without asking who was sleeping poorly above.

Beowulf noticed he was training more again. Not like before, not like a young dog hanging on by the ropes until he collapses. He warmed his joints, forcing his muscles to remember what they had once been for. The sword hilt felt heavier in his hand, yes. But it was still there.

The boys watched him. There was something in their faces that he both hated and needed: hope that the old man would fix things again.

"You want to be back in front," said Wulfgar, as they stood facing each other, breathing heavily, after a practice fight.

“I don’t want to,” Beowulf corrected. “I only know that I have to someday. I’ve spent too many years sending others to die. Some asshole up there expects balance.”

"Do you still believe that the gods keep accounts?"

"Perhaps not the gods," Beowulf murmured. "But something is doing it. Perhaps the fire. Perhaps the earth. Perhaps just my own mind, which cannot bear the fact that I have always come out alive."

At night, when the hall was darker than usual because the wood was running low and no one knew if it was wise to burn too much, he sat on the chair and felt like someone keeping warm a place that wasn't really meant for people.

Crown, cold nights, fire mountain in the head.

“You will go there,” Eadgils said one evening without introduction.

"I often go somewhere," growled Beowulf. "Otherwise the farm would be boring."

"No," said the Grey One. "I mean, you're going to go there. To the hill. When the thing wakes up. You know it. And I know it. You've been running around monsters for so long that you can't help it."

Beowulf was silent. He looked into the fire. It crackled less fiercely than before, as if it were afraid of having to compete with the thing out there.

"It will kill me," he finally said.

"Probably," said Eadgils.

“But if I don’t go,” Beowulf continued, “it will kill everyone else.”

“Probably,” Eadgils said again.

They looked at each other. Two old men, one with a crown, the other with too many years in his bones, both knowing that the bill was slowly approaching its "final point".

"Then there isn't much left to decide," said Beowulf.

“Yes,” replied the Grey One. “How much you drink beforehand.”

Beowulf laughed. And this time, although everything inside him vibrated like the damned hill, there was something honest in the laughter.

The dragon turned in its sleep. That much was clear. It was no longer just a sound beneath the rock. It was in the dust, in dreams, in cracks, in the stories people told, even though they added "but don't tell anyone" to almost every other sentence.

No one had seen him yet. He was still a something. But Beowulf had seen enough shadows to know: if something is big enough, its whisper is enough to make an entire realm quieter.

The following night, as he lay half-awake again, listening to the sound of his own bones, the jolt came once more. Not as strong as before, more like a test. A "I'm still here."

Beowulf sat up, looked into the darkness, and nodded.

"That's alright," he murmured. "I heard you."

Nothing stirred outside. Inside it was loud.

And the dragon, somewhere inside a hill, continued to turn. Still asleep. Still.

The days that followed felt like living in a house where a load-bearing beam was starting to crack. Everything was still standing. Nothing was falling on your head yet. But every creak made you hold your breath for a moment.

People did what people always do: they carried on. Someone had to drive the pigs out, someone had to chop wood, someone had to chicken out, someone had to be born. Life didn't abandon anyone because of a hill that acted like it was having bad dreams. But beneath it all lay this tension, thin as a taut string.

The messengers from the northeast became a daily occurrence. Every morning, one of them would stand in the hall, his coat still covered in dirt, his breath white in the air, and have something to say that smelled of "not normal".

"The stream near Vigmund's farm has gotten warm," said one man. "Not hot, just... warm. Like water in which your hand has been left for too long."

“During the night the sky was briefly red, but only just above the hill, as if someone had opened a door and slammed it shut again,” another person reported.

“A few stones on the slope have melted,” said a third man, placing a piece of it on the table. It was glassy, sharp at the edges, blunt in the middle. It looked as if the rock had tried to melt, but then changed its mind.

The men on the council looked at the thing as if it were about to jump up and leap into their throats.

"Perhaps it's just a crack in the ground," said one of the cautious thinkers. "There's always been fire beneath our feet."

“Yes,” said Wulfgar. “It just didn’t behave as if it had an opinion before.”

Beowulf said little. He picked things up, turned them over, felt their weight, the heat that was no longer there, but had been. He saw more in them than others. Not because he was smarter. Because his mind had been calibrated to monsters for years.

“We’re establishing a ring there,” he finally said. “Not a pretty, golden one. One made of people. No one will sleep closer than half a day’s journey up the hillside. Those who own fields nearby will cultivate them downhill, not uphill. We’ll send timber so they can build new huts further away. Anyone who wants to stay does so at their own risk—and can’t later say I didn’t say anything.”

“Sir,” one ventured, “with that you are admitting that there…” He hunched his back as if the very word weighed him down. “…something is alive.”

“All sorts of things live that we cannot see,” growled Beowulf. “Worms, mice, the thoughts of some men. If that surprised you, you would have been dead long ago.”

He unrolled the map. His finger traced the lines: old routes, villages, streams that looked like veins. He marked the hill, a circle around it, smaller dots at the edge.

"This one will be empty," he said, pointing to a village. "That one too. People are going down here. That slope will be cordoned off. If someone really wants to see if they can balance on the edge of the hole, they can do it alone."

"And what if they don't go?" Eadgils asked.

“Then they will eventually be driven out by something that asks less politely than I do,” Beowulf replied. “I offer them the easier kind of loss: land for life. Anyone who still thinks they are clever after that can argue with the earth themselves.”

The news hit the villages like a cold soup: edible, but heavy on the stomach. Some packed their bags immediately – as quickly as possible after a lifetime spent in huts and pits. Others clung on.

An old woman – small, wrinkled, with hands that looked like roots – stood in the hall one day. She had been let in because she refused to stay outside.

“They say we should leave,” she said, without bowing. “That the mountain is sick. That we should live somewhere else. Do you know how long my people have been digging holes there? How many bodies lie there? How many births have taken place in the same huts that are now ‘too close’?”

Beowulf looked at her. She smelled of smoke, old milk, and earth. A smell that had more to do with the land than with any crown.

"I know," he said.

"You don't know shit," she snarled. "You have your hall. If it shakes here, you run to the other corner of the room. We only have the slope. When you say 'go away,' you're saying 'leave your dead here and start pretending you belong somewhere else.'"

A few men wanted to intervene, because one doesn't speak to kings like that. Beowulf raised his hand and stopped them.

"What do you want me to tell you?" he asked. "To make the mountain stop rising? To promise you it will lie down again if we're all just nice?"

She met his gaze. It was a strangely honest moment – two people of the same age, but in different ways.

“I want you to admit that you know just as little as we do,” she said. “Not that ‘I’ve got everything under control’ face. Not that kingly face. I want to know if you’re scared.”

The hall fell silent so suddenly, as if someone had frozen the smoke.

Beowulf inhaled. Exhaled.

“I’m scared all damn day,” he said then. “For years. Sometimes of men, sometimes of mistakes, sometimes of what I do myself. Now I’m scared of a hill that acts like it has teeth. Satisfied?”

The old woman nodded, slowly, as if that were exactly the answer she needed. "Then tell the others that too," she murmured. "They can bear your fear better than you think. They can't stand to see lies anymore."

She turned around and left, leaning on a stick as if she had just put down a sack she had carried for too long.

After the scene, the atmosphere in the hall was different. No one said it aloud, but they had heard their king use the word no one else used: fear. It made him feel smaller. And heavier at the same time.

In the days that followed, more messengers arrived. Some reported that the relocations were underway—slowly, grumbling, reluctantly, but they were underway. Others said that some, as always, were holding their tails high.

"They think you're exaggerating," said a messenger. "They say you see monsters everywhere because you've seen them before."

Beowulf gave a short laugh. "Perhaps they're right," he said. "But if I see a monster everywhere, I'd rather it be in the hill than in my own bed."

At night, the stillness haunted him. The dragon in his dreams continued to turn. Slowly, sluggishly, but with growing impatience. Once, in his dream, he saw its flanks lift, its scales flickering in the firelight. With each movement, the gold slid a little further. Chains snapped, goblets tipped, coins clinked. It sounded like rain of metal.

In one of these dreams, he saw the cup for the first time. It was a simple cup, with a pattern like those found in many halls: spirals, heads, perhaps a few carved animals. Nothing special if it stood alone on a table. But in this dream, it shone differently. It lay in a corner of the cave, broken off from a larger pile as if a greedy hand had seized it, and now it was gone.

The place where he had been missing was burning. Not a large fire, just a hot spot amidst the remaining cold.

"So, someone really did steal your cup," Beowulf murmured in his dream. "We know how it is, my friend. People steal anything that glitters."

The dragon's eye—he now called it that in his mind, even though he avoided the word during the day—snapped open. No longer a slow, sleepy opening. A ripping open, as if someone had kicked the inside of his eyelid.

The gaze was no longer appraising. It was furious. Not the fury of a man whose wife had been insulted. The fury of an object whose order had been disrupted.

Beowulf woke with a start. He sat up, the covers half torn off him, his mouth dry.

"Again?" Wulfgar lay on the other side, his voice tired.

“Someone has taken something from him,” said Beowulf.

"Whom?"

"The hill. What lies within it. A cup, a piece of gold, something. And now the thing can no longer sleep."

Wulfgar tapped his temple. "You know that sounds crazy."

“I know that I have more experience with crazy things than anyone else here,” Beowulf replied.

The next day brought the confirmation no one wanted. A messenger, again from the northeast, again half-exhausted from the ride.

“Sir,” he exclaimed. “You have found the thief. Or what’s left of him.”

"Where?"

"At the foot of the slope. He was..." The messenger had to compose himself, as if the mere image in his mind would take his breath away. "...he wasn't simply dead. He was... as if he'd

been boiled. From the inside out. No flames on the outside. But his skin... burst open. His eyes..."

The entire hall collectively grimaced.

"And the cup?" asked Beowulf.

The messenger blinked. "You know about a cup?"

"I'll guess," growled Beowulf.

“They say he was carrying a golden cup when he set off,” the man explained. “Something he supposedly retrieved from an old burial site on the hillside. They say that after the night the ground shook the worst, there was a pile of molten metal next to him. What was left of it was no longer like a cup.”

Wulfgar whispered a word that was not normally spoken in the hall when women were nearby.

Beowulf slowly stood up. Every bone in his body seemed to comment on it, but he didn't care.

"Good," he said. "Then we know what we're dealing with."

“With what then?” one of them dared.

Beowulf looked around at the faces that had seen him as a young bastard, as a war animal, as a hero, as a king, as an old man. Now they looked at him as if he were about to deliver their next nightmare.

He took a deep breath.

"With something that rests on gold and gives none of it up willingly," he said. "With something that sleeps but can kill without rising. With something whose breath boils men."

He could have said "dragon." He didn't. The word was there, hovering above them, falling into their ears like invisible dust. They were all thinking it.

After the meeting, he sat alone on the chair. The hall was emptier than it should have been. Sounds fill a hall. Now it sounded hollow.

How often in his life had he stood at this point? There was something there. Not clear, not kind, not human. Others had talked about it, fearfully avoided it, written songs, made sacrifices. And in the end, he stood there, with a sword, with a body that held more old scores than fresh strength, and knew: It would all come down to him again.

"You wanted a quiet old age," he said to himself.

The walls of the hall creaked as if they were laughing.

The dragon—call it what you will, mountain, sickness, rage—turned in its sleep. But it was no longer a comfortable turning. It was the tossing and turning of a body that senses something is wrong.

And Beowulf knew that the moment when the Thing would fully open its eyes was no longer in some distant future, but at the end of a path he had already traveled without realizing it.

The only question remaining was: Would he go to meet it – or would he wait until the flames came to him?

The jolt that had boiled the thief was not the end, but the beginning of the real trembling. After that, nothing was truly solid anymore. Not the earth. Not the people. Not Beowulf.

During the day, the empire did what empires do when they sense something greater stirring nearby: they talked around it. In the villages, they said, "The hill is acting strangely," in the halls, they said, "The gods are upset," around the fire, they said, "It'll be alright." But everyone talked. No one was silent. Silence would have been more honest.

Beowulf sat in his chair and listened. He had become king of a land where suddenly everyone had transformed into geologists, prophets, and cowards all at once. Some wanted to explain, others to sacrifice, still others to relocate. Some wanted everything at once.

More people came from the margins. Men with hollowed-out faces, women who looked as if they had packed too quickly and forgotten something important they couldn't name now. Children who had understood too early that earth isn't just soil, but can also be a mouth.

They stood in the courtyard, with bundles, sacks, and cows on ropes, staring up at the hall as if a roof could protect them from what lives beneath the rock.

“We heard we were supposed to move further away,” said one of the men, who looked like a tree trunk with arms. “So now we’re further away. Now what?”

“Now you live here as if you’ve always done so,” said Beowulf. “You help hold the rampart, feed the farm, bear the children. And you don’t tell your neighbors with every other sentence that you used to be closer to the hill, so they can admire you for it.”

A few laughed. Others looked offended. People like losing ground as long as they can portray themselves as special victims. When you take away that role, they're almost angrier than they were at the hill.

Space was a problem. The courtyards near the hall became overcrowded. Two families in one hut, three families in a courtyard designed so that one could dominate and the rest had to submit. Now everyone was rubbing against each other like stones in a shaken sack.

“We had to bring them in,” said Eadgils, as they stood on the sidelines watching the chaos unfold. “But you know what that means: more mouths, more fighting, more of everything.”

"More life," Beowulf muttered. "And more stuff for the dragon to light later if we screw up."

The word had slipped out. Dragon. Not hill, not fire mountain, not "that thing there." It hung in the air between them for a moment, heavy as a wet coat. The gray one heard it, but only briefly twitched a corner of his mouth.

"There you go," he said calmly. "Now the animal has a name. At least for the two of us."

“As if it had been waiting for it,” Beowulf replied.

The bards got wind of it without anyone telling them. They have a knack for words too heavy to remain unspoken. It had already been used in whispers. Not yet in song. Not yet.

The humming became more regular during the nights. Not a constant drone, more like those coughing fits someone gets when they have something stuck in their throat that won't come out. Sometimes a jolt, sometimes a dull thump, sometimes the distant impression of thunderous rumbling, even though the sky was clear.

Sometimes, when the hall was completely silent and only a few half-burned pieces of wood clacked, Beowulf heard a kind of deep rumble in the distance. Not loud. But enough to make his stomach clench for a moment.

"He sweats in his sleep," he once said, almost under his breath, more to himself than to Wulfgar. "The hill. Or what's inside it."

"Perhaps he's having bad dreams," Wulfgar suggested.

“Perhaps we all dream within him,” said Beowulf.

The men on the border reported that game was avoiding the slopes. Deer, which had previously left their tracks there, were now giving them wide berths. Foxes were seen less frequently. Even the crows preferred to hang in the bare trees further down rather than perch on the warm stones.

"When the rats start writing songs about us, we know we're really screwed," Wulfgar muttered.

Inside the hall, people were simultaneously trying to pretend it was all some distant, interesting story. They were drinking and placing bets.

"How long until the hill cracks?" – "How many villages will it swallow?" – "Do you think the king will ride there himself if something happens, or will he send us?"

Beowulf heard it. Not all of it, but enough. He also heard the other kind of talk: quieter, in corners, when they thought he was out of reach.

"He's old," one of them hissed. "He would have been here three times already in the past. Now he sits in his chair as if hoping it will go away on its own."

“He’s the only one who knows how to handle something like this,” another countered. “If he falls, we’re completely finished.”

Chair or sword. King or old dog. Savior or relic. All in the same sentences, the same mouths, the same mead.

Beowulf drank more, but not in the way people think. Not to forget. More to internally disinfect his mind. Mead as a weak cleanser against faces, sounds, old battles, new rifts. He made sure he was never the most drunk in the room. That was his pride: he could destroy himself without completely letting go of the reins.

One evening, when the courtyard was quiet outside and the bards were taking a break between two exaggerated songs, there wasn't a knock at the door, but a knock in the earth. A short, sharp blow, from afar, but deep. The benches trembled, the cups clinked. A child began to scream before its mother understood why.

The noise in the hall stopped. For three heartbeats, it was silent.

"He has turned around again," Beowulf said calmly.

"How long can such a creature sleep?" asked Wulfgar.

“Longer than we live,” Beowulf replied. “But we’ve pulled the covers off him now.”

From the villages came not only messengers, but also questions that sounded like hidden demands.

“We heard you used to fight monsters abroad,” said a man from one of the middle farms, who had come with a delegation. “With that thing in the lake, with that woman from the mire. What did you do back then?”

“I went and killed it,” said Beowulf.

The man nodded as if it were an instruction manual. "Can you do that again?"

Beowulf looked at him for a long time. "Back then I was young and foolish enough to believe that was always an option," he said. "Now I know: Sometimes you die doing it. And sometimes everything dies with you."

The man seemed momentarily perplexed, almost offended. People want simple answers. "Yes" or "No." "I'll go and save you" or "Find another god." They don't like this in-between platitude, where truth lies.

"So?"

“So I’ll hold the place together until I’m sure how the cattle breathe,” said Beowulf. “If I leave before my time is right, you’ll die dumber than you need to.”

The man bit his lip, finally nodded and pulled away.

At night, when the court had fallen silent, Beowulf sometimes sat not in the hall, but outside on the rampart, a skin draped over his shoulders, his sword beside him, more out of habit than necessity. He gazed toward the hill. Nothing to see. Only darkness, a few stars, silhouettes of distant trees.

But in his mind, the mountain was sharply defined. He saw it as it appeared from the inside, not as it lay on the outside. Rock, gold, scales, breath.

“You’re coming,” he said one night. “I know. I’m coming too. Just not today.”

Wulfgar sat down next to him, growling because his knees also no longer liked stairs.

"Are you talking to that thing?" he asked.

“I’m practicing,” said Beowulf. “So that I’m not just stuttering when we meet.”

"You won't stutter," said Wulfgar. "You'll swear, laugh, and try to smash his skull in. That's how I know you."

"My arm knows me differently now," Beowulf murmured. "And so does my breath."

They were silent. The wind played in the planks of the wall. Far away, much too far to be considered a sound, there was this deep something. Not a sound, more the absence of silence.

“Are you afraid of dying?” Wulfgar suddenly asked.

Beowulf thought for a moment, not because he didn't have an answer, but because he wanted to choose the right one.

“I’m not afraid of dying itself,” he said then. “I’m afraid of dying senselessly. Like an idiot on wet stairs. Or in some shitty battle that nobody remembers. If I have to go, then at least I want to know that I wasn’t just one of many who happened to be in the way.”

"You won't," said Wulfgar. "You're always deliberately getting in the way."

Beowulf grinned, briefly, wearily. "Well," he murmured. "Then I suppose it will be the same this time."

Inside the hall, the bards finally began to use the word. At first in subordinate verses, hidden in images.

"Deep beneath the stone, where a fire-crazed beast lies upon gold and old mistakes, there something stirs that is more than a beast, and counts who lives, who flees, who kneels."

They didn't say "dragon," but everyone heard it between the lines. The children whispered it to each other when they thought the adults were too drunk to hear. The old people said it when they thought no one was listening.

Beowulf heard everything. And within him grew that miserable, clear calm he knew: the calm before a battle that you know will tear you apart, no matter how it turns out.

The dragon turned in its sleep. Perhaps it would turn a hundred more times before fully waking up. Perhaps this was just the tossing and turning of a body stretching.

But every jolt pushed the empire a little closer to the brink.

Beowulf was old. His body knew it, his mind not always. But both knew that there were things you couldn't pass on to the next generation without them cursing you. Some debts you had to collect yourself. Some monsters you had to face yourself.

So he waited. With alert bones, with noise in his head, with a kingdom that had established itself on shaky ground.

And somewhere, in a belly of rock and gold, something was turning that had probably never heard its name before – but would know it in the end anyway.

CHAPTER 21 – Gold, Greed and Other Diseases

Gold has always been a disease, only no one called it that. They called it "wealth," "reward," "favor of the gods." But it behaved like a fever: first you get warm, then you get stupid, and in the end no one remembers what you originally wanted.

Beowulf had spent his life surrounded by gold, without ever possessing any. It sounded strange, but it was true. Ever since he could walk, he had seen others seize it, distribute rings, amass treasures, and place chains around their necks as if they were medals, not shackles. He had been the type to shed blood so that others could close their chests.

Now he was king, and beneath his high seat lay a treasury. Not as ostentatious as in the songs, but enough metal to keep men entertained for a while. Silver bowls, gold rings, a few goblets with stories he wished he'd forgotten, swords with hilts that would never fit real hands again because they had long since become symbols.

He didn't go down often. The stairs to the chamber were narrow, the air cold, and the torchlight made everything look like a cheap theatrical backdrop. Once a month, maybe twice, when some prince was visiting or a large distribution was due, he went down.

“You should check more often,” Eadgils the Grey once said. “Let’s not have someone steal our own treasures, just as the hill lost its cup.”

"Which of mine wants to go down into a hole to stare at metal?" growled Beowulf. "If someone steals gold, they'll do it up top, among the cups and barrels, where they can drink while they're at it."

Nevertheless, he went down that evening. Not because he believed the horrors. Because the word "cup" had lain like a stone in his chest ever since the reports from the Fire Mountain. A thief, a gold cup, a boiled body. He wanted to see what gold looked like that had belonged to no one but him. If anyone at all.

The chamber smelled of old metal, cold smoke, and a faint whiff of damp earth. He'd learned that was the case with all treasure chambers: no matter how much gold you poured in, the floor remained the same pile of dirt from which everything grew and into which everything fell.

Torches cast flickering lights onto heaps of metal. It was not a pretty sight. Not the neat, tidy treasure that bards like to sing of. More like a warehouse for human addiction: piles, crates, rings stacked haphazardly, a dented helmet from another era that no longer fit modern heads.

Beowulf stopped and looked around. It was quiet, apart from the soft crackling of the flames. But in his mind, it was loud. He heard the voices of men who had had their throats slit for gold, who had been half-burned in the dirt so that someone else could wear a new bracelet.

"So that's where you are," he murmured. "You are the reason why I know so many names that no one says anymore when the bowl is passed around."

He bent down and picked up a ring. It was heavy, cold, with engraved patterns that some fellow had once deemed important. Beowulf turned it between his fingers. A handsome ring. It could be one he'd give to one of his men. One who would look back at him with gratitude, as if he'd given him life, not just metal.

"Do you think that thing in the hill started out similarly?" asked a voice behind him.

Wulfgar. He had followed him downstairs, like a dog that could never be far away when there was a smell of trouble.

“What?” asked Beowulf, without turning around.

“Collecting gold,” said Wulfgar. “One, another, another. First it’s gifts, then it’s raids, and eventually you wake up lying on a pile of shit that’s heavy, keeps you awake, and makes every asshole around you want to pull on you.”

Beowulf let the ring slide back into the darkness. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps the dragon is simply the logical evolution of us. We gather it in the cellar, he gathers it in his belly. We distribute rings, he distributes fire. Perhaps we are the same disease in two different bodies."

They walked between the piles. Here and there, individual pieces flashed into view: a brooch with a dried trace of blood still clinging to it; a chain made not of gold, but of teeth, between which a few small gold plates hung; a sword hilt, polished to a shine, although the blade was rusted, as if someone had prioritized appearance over function.

"Do you know what pisses me off the most?" Beowulf asked quietly.

“That there is never enough of it?” Wulfgar asked.

“That we pretend this is justice,” said Beowulf. “As if every ring were a fair reward, every cup a logical consequence of courage. We both know that loads of bastards died rich, while decent dogs rotted away without helmets in some ditch. And yet here we sit, distributing the metal like sacred relics.”

"Do you want to burn them?"

Beowulf snorted. "The gold? No. Then they'll really start making songs about it. 'The king who burned the gold!' Half of them would think I was crazy, the other half a saint. Both are annoying."

They stopped in front of a crate that looked different from the others. Larger, thicker, with iron bands that seemed more defiant than protective.

“Huglac’s Rest,” said Wulfgar. “What they managed to bring back from Friesland before everything collapsed.”

Beowulf stared at the wood. He didn't see the chest. He saw the dead king's belly, the mound, the dirt, the blood. He saw the hands of the men who had tried to salvage any metal besides the corpse, knowing that the next king would want to know how much of the plunder remained.

"Open up," he said.

Wulfgar pulled up the bolt, the hinges creaking. Inside lay pieces of gold and silver, cups, bracelets, a few precious stones that looked as if they'd rather not be there. It was nothing compared to the piles in the dragon's belly that Beowulf had seen in his dream. And yet, it was enough to keep a few villages quiet for years.

“Sometimes I think,” said Wulfgar, “maybe the dragon out there is just the pile of all the chests we never opened. All the greed that built up until it grew teeth.”

Beowulf laughed dryly. "You should become a bard," he said. "Only you put too much truth into your verses. They don't like that."

They stood there for a while, looking at the gold as if they were staring at a wound.

“Do you know what will happen if they hear about the treasure under the hill?” asked Wulfgar.

“They will suddenly be ready to die,” said Beowulf. “Not for the kingdom. Not for me. For shiny crap they’ll never wear because they’ll disappear in the smoke before then.”

He could picture it. The boys in the courtyard, their eyes shining at the news. "A dragon sitting on gold?" – "How much?" – "More than here?" – "Imagine if you only get a fraction of it out."

Gold, greed, and other diseases. They all follow the same pattern: First, you fantasize about what you would do with the metal. Pay off debts, build halls, impress women, secure your children's future. Then you start counting how many lives that might cost. And in the end, you tell yourself: "If I don't get it, someone else will."

Beowulf was old enough to have seen this film several times. He had seen men die in droughts because some prince had preferred to hoard gold rather than buy grain. He had witnessed mercenaries switching sides like shirts because someone had promised them one more ring. He had found himself at the helm of wars where no one was sure anymore whether it was still about land or merely about being embalmed in metal.

“We should stockpile food, not rings,” he said. “Wood, salt, grain. Things that won’t burn if a dragon sneezes.”

“Gold doesn’t burn either,” Wulfgar explained.

“Gold burns in the mind,” Beowulf replied. “And that is the only fire I cannot extinguish.”

They climbed back upstairs. The stairs creaked under their weight, the air grew warmer, louder. Upstairs, the hall awaited them with its usual sounds: men talking themselves up, women keeping the place running, children who didn't yet understand the value of metal and were therefore the only sane ones in the room.

Later in the council, a minor prince hurled the issue at him like a weapon: "We do have treasures, sir. If the villages in the northeast are suffering, we can give them some gold so they can settle elsewhere."

“Gold doesn’t build houses,” said Beowulf. “It only buys hands. And we don’t have enough hands.”

“But if we don’t give them anything, they’ll turn against us,” the man said. “They’ll say we’re sitting up here on our pile while they’re trembling down below.”

“We are not sitting on a pile,” Beowulf growled. “We are sitting on an empire that tries every day not to fall apart while you count your treasure in the cellar.”

The prince blushed. "I only meant..."

“I know what you meant,” Beowulf interrupted. “You wanted to put the word ‘gold’ in the same sentence as ‘justice’ to make yourself feel better. Do that in your own hall. Here we call things by their proper names.”

Gold. Greed. And other diseases.

On those nights, when the bards grew quieter and the villages' cries for help softer but more intense, Beowulf sometimes sat by the fire with a cup in his hand that bore no relation to the one in the hill. He pondered whether the dragon was the enemy at all.

Perhaps, he thought, he was merely the fever indicating that the illness had been lingering in the body for too long. Perhaps we were the real problem—we who elevate metal to the status of gleaming gods while we rot in the mud. Perhaps the dragon was just the final symptom: the culmination of all that we had sought to accumulate.

And yet he knew: once the fire had escaped from the belly of the hill, once it had crept across the fields, once it had consumed livestock, houses, and children, then no amount of philosophizing would help. Then someone would be needed again with a sword, bones, and enough stupidity to throw themselves between the gold fever and the rest of the world.

It was an old story with new flames. Gold had always been the reason men went to battle. Now, perhaps, it was the reason a dragon awoke.

Beowulf set down the empty cup. He heard the distant, deep sound creeping through the ground.

"That's fine," he murmured. "You're lying on your pile, I'm on mine. Let's see whose illness is worse in the end."

The hall breathed. The empire remained silent. And beneath rock and gold, something stirred that had learned that a missing cup was reason enough to set a world ablaze.

If you stare at a pile of gold long enough, it starts staring back. Not with eyes—with possibilities. Every ring, every bowl, every cursed goblet whispers in your ear: "You could…" You could expand the halls. You could pay more men. You could give those poor wretches outside new roofs. You could, you could, you could. And somewhere in that chorus is the small voice that says: "You could also just buy a few more barrels of mead and forget about the rest."

Beowulf knew all those voices. He was surrounded by them like a drunk in a tavern. Everyone thought he was the most important person in the room. He had learned to ignore the calls of the mead jugs when necessary. Gold was different. Gold stuck. It remained in the mind, even long after the cup was empty.

The news from the villages became more and more like a price tag with each passing day. A house collapsed: four people, including two children. A barn swept away: five cows, three goats, a farmer with half a leg. A slope collapsed: farmland that was nothing special before, but now yielded absolutely nothing.

“We can give them something from the treasure,” Eadgils said in a meeting that felt more like a funeral than a council. “Not much. Symbolic. So they know they are not alone.”

Beowulf stared at the wooden board in front of him. The notch at the edge was new; someone had absentmindedly sawed into it with a knife. "Gold as a consolation prize," he muttered. "You're pouring metal into a wound and hoping it will stop stinking."

“It’s not about healing,” replied the Grey One. “It’s about making sure they don’t think you’re sitting up here counting your treasure while their roofs disappear down the hillside.”

"They think that anyway," Wulfgar interjected. "They always think that. Whether you distribute or not."

“All the more reason to at least plug a few of the loudest flaps,” Eadgils insisted. “Give them something to buy new beams with, tools, seeds. The rest is their problem. But if you give them nothing, their greed will turn against you, not the hill.”

Beowulf knew the old man wasn't wrong. People are like a strange flock: as soon as there's a glimmer somewhere, they fly towards it. If they can't reach it, they turn around and fly towards the next thing they think is responsible. Right now, the hill was far away and he was near.

“Good,” he said finally. “We’ll do it this way: No man comes here and leaves empty-handed if he can prove he lost a house or land to the slope. But I’m not handing out gifts to everyone who claims their dog is afraid of the mountain, so now he wants a gold ring.”

They decided to make a list. Lists are an attempt to number the chaos. The names of those who had demonstrably lost something were written down. Men set off with sacks whose metal clinked, handing out rings and small cups like medicines that cure no one but calm everyone.

The effect was exactly as Beowulf had expected: mixed. Some wept when the stuff was thrust into their hands. They cradled a ring as if it were the heart of a dead child they had accidentally received back. Others smiled too quickly, too broadly.

“Do you see?” they said in their villages. “The king provides for us. He has a good heart.”

“He’s simply afraid that otherwise we’ll run away or rebel,” others replied.

Others looked at the gold and saw nothing at all. They were already thinking ahead: If the mountain over there really is sitting on a larger heap, why should they settle for a measly ring?

Gold is bad medicine because it has side effects that are worse than the original pain.

The greed first manifested itself in conversations, as always. Two runners whispered by the fire: "Did you hear how much is supposed to be over there? The dragon—" they used the word openly now, at least among themselves—"is sitting on a treasure that makes our chambers look like a beggar's bag."

“Did Beowulf himself say that?” asked the other.

"Of course not. But he was there. He heard the humming, saw the glow. Do you think a being would voluntarily lie down on a pile of stones for no reason? There's gold there, brother. Gold older than your family tree. If only one could get a few pieces of it..."

"If." That's the most important word in this whole disease. "If we survive." "If we get close." "If the king allows it." "If the dragon sleeps." People are building entire palaces out of "ifs," while the walls of their huts crumble.

Beowulf received reports that some young men had started doing "exercises" in the hills. Not directly at Fire Mountain—they weren't that stupid yet—but nearby. Exploring ravines, crossing boulder fields, spending nights out, as if trying to get used to the idea that the earth beneath them could burst into a coughing fit at any moment.

“They are preparing,” said Wulfgar. “Not necessarily for the right thing, but they are doing something.”

"They are practicing how to die without realizing it," said Beowulf. "They call it adventure. Later we call it loss."

In the council, a minor prince spoke up, whose eyes always shone a little too brightly whenever the word "treasure" was uttered.

“Sir,” he said, “we could take advantage of the proximity to the hill. If we could find a way to at least partially recover the dragon’s treasure—or whatever it is—we could make the kingdom so rich that no neighbor would dare to question it. We could buy weapons, pay men, build walls, erect halls, stockpile supplies…”

“We could just wait until you swallow your tongue,” Beowulf interrupted.

The others laughed, but the prince persisted. "Isn't it perhaps even our duty to secure this treasure before it destroys us?"

“Our duty is not to die for gold before it is necessary,” said Beowulf. “I have seen more than once how men wanted to ‘secure’ something and ended up losing only themselves.”

"But what if someone else comes along?"

"Who?" Beowulf asked sharply. "The neighbors who haven't even been able to keep their own pigs together for years? A people from the south who aren't even on our maps? If someone else wants to mess with the dragon, they can. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll both perish."

It was a harsh, ugly argument, but the truth rarely had beautiful teeth.

After the meeting, Wulfgar confronted him about it. "You know he won't stop," he said. "Greedy people never get enough to eat. They'll keep talking until someone picks up on their nonsense."

“Then make sure they don’t reach the right people,” Beowulf replied. “If I find out that one of my young hounds has set foot too close to the hillside to smell gold, I’ll tear its fur off first. And I want them to know it’s me, not the dragon.”

It wasn't just the greed for the treasure hidden in the hill. It was the same old, everyday greed, now given new excuses. A farmer demanding more land, claiming he'd been driven from the hill. A trader raising prices, arguing he had to charge a "risk premium" because the roads were unsafe.

"They're already using the thing before it really gets us," Eadgils said dryly. "A good monster is always a relevant argument."

“Just like me,” Beowulf muttered. “‘The king wants it so,’ ‘the king has said so,’ ‘the king needs gold.’ When they want to justify their nonsense, they always use those who sit furthest away.”

On those nights, when he lay awake again, staring into the darkness, he sometimes imagined what it would be like if the gold suddenly vanished. Simply gone. No more metal beneath the halls, no more rings on the fingers, no more cups worth more than the teeth of the men who drank from them.

What would remain? A bunch of people on wet ground. A few halfway decent swords, a couple of huts, a wall, a handful of stories, and a great many shoulders that suddenly didn't know what they'd been toiling under. Would they then take care of the fields, the sea, the children? Or would they simply invent a new kind of gold to hunt for?

Perhaps, he thought, that's how we're built. We need something shiny so we don't have to deal with the dirt we're standing on.

And yet, when he thought of the hill, of the thing beneath it, resting on a treasure that held more stories than all the halls combined, there was this tiny, ugly spot inside him that whispered: "What if I could just see a single piece of it? Hold it in my hand. Not in a dream. Really. Just once."

He hated this spot. It belonged to the same kind of darkness that had driven the thieves into the hill.

"You are no better than the one it cooked," he said to himself.

“Yes,” something else inside him answered. “I know that’s how I am. Difference.”

That was the consolation old men allowed themselves: they believed that their wisdom set them apart from the rest of humanity. In reality, they were just one step further back at the same precipice.

Outside, the stars wandered across the courtyard as if they hadn't heard a thing. Inside, a cup clinked occasionally. Somewhere someone snored, somewhere a child cried, somewhere a couple whispered, not wanting others to know how much they needed each other.

And deep beneath stone and gold lay a creature that had perfected the sickness of men: it possessed everything and begrudged no one anything.

Beowulf knew that in the end he wouldn't be fighting against the gold. Not against greed. He would be fighting against the face these two things had given each other.

And he knew that somewhere in a boy's mind the story was already growing: "We'll get what's rightfully ours."

They didn't know that it was less about "us" and "stands" than about a statistic made of flames.

Gold, greed, and other diseases. Some days he could no longer tell the difference.

The real plague didn't come from the volcano, but from gossip. It was always gossip. Men can handle blood, hunger, and cold. But words that stick in your throat like fishbones—that's what breaks them.

It began with the displaced. The people who had their farms near the hill were now scattered like chaff that someone had roughly swept through the yard. Some ended up close to the hall, others in villages that already had too many names and too little space. Everywhere they went, each of them brought two things with them: a bundle of belongings – and a story.

"The mountain breathes," they said. "The ground is warm like the flesh of a sick animal." – "We saw the glow at night, as if the earth were lighting the sky from below." – "The man who stole the cup looked as if someone had boiled him from the inside out."

Those who listened passed the stories on, and at each stop they gained a new twist, a little more brilliance, a little more horror. Soon, one cooked thief had become a handful, a tremor of the earth a partial collapse, the glimmer on the horizon "a flame as high as a hall".

Greed and fear are twins. Some heard "dragon" and thought "gold." Others heard the same word and thought "fire." And all of them together began to breathe differently.

Beowulf noticed it in the sounds of the courtyard. Before, there had been that dull, honest noise of people simply trying to survive their day: shoveling, shouting, the barking of dogs,

the cursing of women carrying heavy loads, the swearing of men dropping things. Now there was a different undertone. Muffled questions. A clipped laugh here, a "pssst" there as he passed.

Once he stopped, behind a hut where no one expected him. Two young warriors were leaning there, their helmets loosely in their hands, their voices too quiet for the hall, but loud enough for the courtyard.

“I tell you, this isn’t a curse, it’s an opportunity,” one whispered. “When the king is old and finally goes, he won’t be able to carry everything alone. One of us will always be nearby when things get serious. If we only go a little bit…”

"A small piece of what? Of a treasure you've never seen? You don't even have the money to afford proper leather," the other snarled. "You're not even sure you'll survive the first scream when the beast wakes up."

"Neither do you. But if we're going to die anyway, then I'd rather die with my hands full of gold than with a rusty shield without a history."

Beowulf could have roared. He could have gone around the hut and grabbed the brat by the collar, asking him if his brain had a separate exit from which it had already escaped. Instead, he stood still, took a few breaths, until his initial anger had settled like mud in water.

Greed. A disease. It smelled like hope, sounded like courage, and was neither.

Later he told Wulfgar about it. Wulfgar listened, snorted, and rubbed the back of his neck. "It was only a matter of time," he said. "As soon as you put 'treasure' and 'dragon' in the same sentence, they all either want to run away or run towards you."

"You should concentrate more on staying away," growled Beowulf.

“That’s not how they’re built. Neither are you,” Wulfgar countered. “Or don’t tell me you didn’t feel the slightest pang in your stomach when you heard how much metal was down there.”

Beowulf met his gaze. "Of course I had it," he said. "I'm no better than them. I just have years more practice in not chasing after that sting like a dog after a bone."

The disease spread to other places as well. At the next gathering, half celebration, half obligation, a merchant slammed his cups down on the tables and boasted: "Straight from the north, straight from the area by the Fire Mountain. Whoever drinks from these cups may well be holding the same metal in their hand that the dragon smelled."

The men laughed, some reaching in greedily, others pretending not to care. But the atmosphere in the room changed. It was as if the merchant had tipped small pieces of a myth onto the table instead of cups. Everyone wanted to touch them. Just for a moment. Just briefly.

Beowulf watched through gritted teeth. He saw how one of the younger princes pointedly looked away – a surer sign of lust could hardly be imagined.

“We should forbid him from doing business,” Wulfgar said quietly, as the merchant was about to sell his “dragon shells” to the next group of warriors.

"And then?" asked Beowulf. "He'll find another hall where they're even dumber and sell the same thing with twice as many words. No. Let him. Let them see how ridiculous greed looks when it comes walking on two legs and with a belly."

But even as he said this, he knew that ridicule was no antidote. Men feel shame briefly – and then still grab what glitters.

Sometimes he felt like the administrator of an asylum where everyone had the same illness, himself included, only in varying degrees. One man drooled over every sliver of gold, another over power, a third over stories in which he was bigger than his shadow allowed.

And then there were those that didn't look like gold at all, yet were still eaten by it.

A farmer, whom he had valued for his calm demeanor, stood before him one day. One of those who usually only spoke when it came to the weather and the crops. Now his eyes glowed in a way that had nothing to do with fever.

“Sir,” he said, “I heard that you gave gold to the displaced. We here haven’t lost anything yet because we’re too far from the hill. But when the dragon comes, it will burn everything down. Isn’t it fair that we receive some compensation now? For what might happen?”

“You want compensation for something that hasn’t happened yet,” Beowulf said slowly. “For a catastrophe that you’re not even sure will affect your village.”

The farmer nodded, as if it were a normal thought and not a blow to the neck of reason.

“If that’s how you think,” Beowulf continued, “I’d have to give gold to everyone who’s going to die someday. And I don’t know anyone who lives here forever.”

A few people in the room laughed. The farmer didn't. "I was just thinking..."

“That’s exactly the problem,” Beowulf interrupted. “You’re starting to think you’re entitled to something just because something great is waking up somewhere out there.”

He sent the man away with a sack of grain instead of a ring. More practical, less glamorous, harder to sing about.

“You’re starting to treat them like children,” Eadgils said later.

“They’re behaving like them,” Beowulf replied. “Only children get tired eventually. Greed doesn’t.”

At night, the dragon continued to appear in his dreams, but differently. Less as an external threat, more as a mirror. Once, the beast lay upon his gold, its scales black as charred wood, its eyes half-closed. In a corner of the cave, Beowulf saw himself sitting. Without a crown, without armor. Only in his fur, a goblet beside him, his hands on his knees.

He watched the dragon breathe. The glow between the scales, the brief flicker at the nostrils. And suddenly he realized they were breathing in the same rhythm. In. Out. In. Out.

"There you go," something inside him said. "The difference isn't that big."

He awoke with a deep, dark anger. Not at the cattle. At himself. At his entire cursed life of wrestling and bloodshed, of glory and reckoning.

"Perhaps the illness isn't the gold," he thought. "Perhaps we are. The gold is just lying around. We are the ones who make it a reason to die."

But philosophy didn't pay guards, feed people, or stop flames. The next morning he was king again, not a weary thinker. The news from the hill wasn't any better. Here another jolt, there a small rockfall, over there a patch of forest whose ground was suddenly charred, as if lightning had struck, only no one had seen the lightning.

And somewhere in that mixture of greed, gold, and slowly growing fire, it was clear: it wouldn't stop with just one cooked thief. The first lesson of the disease was always: "It only affects other people."

All it took was one person to think again: "I'm smarter than the biggest idiot. I'm faster. I'm quieter. I'm more careful." One person who set off at night with a cup in his head and a hole in his heart that he wanted to plug with metal.

Beowulf knew this. He knew that no matter how much he forbade, warned, or scolded, in the end it would always be someone else, somewhere in a hut, with too many bills, too little future, and the sound of coins in his dreams.

Gold, greed, and other diseases. He would have liked to end the chapter. Instead, he realized: It was just the headline.

And deep inside a hill lay one, waiting for someone else to try and take something from his plate.

CHAPTER 22 – A Thief, a Cup, a Wildfire

The second thief wasn't the smartest man in the realm, but he wasn't the dumbest either. It's precisely from this middle ground that the most dangerous people come. The truly stupid die young, the truly clever know when to keep their hands off. This one—Hrothmar, son of someone who'd perished in the mire—stood in between, with enough brains to justify his own greed, and enough stupidity to follow it.

He was one of those who never quite made it near the table, but close enough to know the smell of meat. He had spent his life standing in the hall's shadows, hauling spears, rolling barrels, chopping wood—the dirty work no one sings about. He knew the sound of rings clinking together, the way men unconsciously wrapped their hands around the cup when someone less well-fed passed by.

Hrothmar had watched others being rewarded. For courage, for stupidity, for luck. He had seen a boy receive a bracelet for a half-successful punch, while he himself had broken a rib so as not to let the same lad die in training.

"Life owes you something," whispered a voice in his head. It wasn't a real voice, just that kind of inner worm that eventually starts to sound like a friend. "You've carried enough, bled enough. When's it finally your turn?"

He heard the stories from the hill. Just like everyone else. About the first thief being cooked. About the warm earth, the humming, the glowing. Most heard "cooked" and thought, "Better not." Hrothmar heard "cup" and "gold" and thought, "He was too stupid."

He sat in a corner of the hall when one of the bards once again sang along the line between courage and stupidity. "…and one took what was not his, from the belly of the fire mountain, and hotter than any hearth fire, his own smoke cooked him up…" The men roared with laughter, some spit superstitiously into the embers.

Hrothmar drank from a cup that didn't belong to him, but which he dutifully returned before the owner noticed. He was good at that: taking and putting things back without leaving a trace. Years in the shadows teach you that sort of thing.

The thought didn't come to him all at once. It crept in. Like all bad things. At first, it was just a blink: If someone was stupid enough to go right to the mouth of the hill and take something from the thing there—why not someone more cautious? Someone who knew the mountain because he'd grown up on it. Someone who could hear at night whether a man was asleep or just pretending.

"The first one was an idiot," said the inner voice. "Probably drunk, probably arrogant, probably alone. You would do it differently. You are quieter. You are more patient. The king doesn't know your name—so neither does the dragon."

There was a kind of skewed logic to it that Hrothmar liked. He began to explain to himself why it wasn't just greed.

"If I bring something," he thought, "something from there… if I come back with a piece of the treasure, they can no longer pretend it's all just talk. Then the king will have to act. Perhaps I'll even get a ring in return, a piece of land, a place closer to the fire. I'm doing this for all of us."

The best lies are the ones you believe yourself.

He didn't speak to anyone about it. Too clever for that. He listened to others. Hunters who told of paths. Displaced people who knew the hill intimately. Guards who boasted about how far they dared to go before their knees buckled. From all this, he created a map in his mind. Not a parchment, but a network of trees, rocks, streams, dark patches that others avoided.

Three nights before he left, he had a dream which he took as a good omen. He saw himself in a cave, the light dim, the floor covered in shiny objects. He saw no dragon, only mountains of metal. He went to a cup, simple but heavy, picked it up, and nothing happened. No roar, no fire, just that pleasant weight in his hands.

"You see," said the voice as he woke up. "It already belongs to you in your dreams."

He told no one that since that night he had been waking up in a cold sweat. That in the dark he sometimes felt as if the room itself were breathing. That didn't fit into the story he had built for himself.

At the same time, Beowulf sat at the other end of the same hall, watching other men talk. He knew the look of those who calculated too much with their eyes, who saw not only the next meal, but something beyond it.

He barely noticed Hrothmar. Another shadow among many. One who did what he was told, not loudly, not conspicuously. No backslapper, no loudmouth. The kind you only miss when the stable is suddenly empty.

“You see faces everywhere and look for the ones that shine,” Wulfgar once told him. “The others slip through the cracks.”

“The others are carrying the load,” Beowulf replied. “But that’s precisely why I don’t see them. I only ever see those who shout.”

Hrothmar didn't shout. He simply waited until time, the mead, and the darkness had overlapped to such an extent that no one was paying much attention to who was going where.

When he stepped out of the hall that night, the courtyard was silent. A few torches still burned, more out of habit than necessity. The guards at the gate barely nodded at him. It was normal for men to go out at night—to pee, to vomit, to think, to fuck. Nobody asked what kind of outing it was.

He had little luggage. Just an axe, a knife, a water skin, a piece of bread, an old coat. No shield, no helmet. He didn't want to fight. He wanted to come, take, and leave. A silent fire, not a loud blaze.

The air was cold and clear. The sky was full of stars. It was one of those nights when you think the world is orderly because you can see everything above you. The mistake is: the most important things are below.

Hrothmar walked. A horse made a noise. He wanted to be one of the shadows known only to the earth. He knew the first paths leading out, the ruts left by wagon wheels, the tracks of the herds. Further out, the paths narrowed, the ground became harder, stonier. The sounds of the farmyard eventually disappeared, as if someone had closed a door.

He ran until his legs burned. He took only short breaks, knelt in the grass, drank hastily, chewed bread without registering the taste. In his mind was only the image he had constructed from all the stories he had heard: an entrance, a crack, and gold beyond.

The hill emerged in the first gray. Not as a monster. First as a darker line on the horizon. Then as a back, then as a body. It didn't look like a dragon. It looked like an old, tired bone sticking out of the earth.

Hrothmar stopped, rested his hands on his thighs, and breathed. He felt the trembling in his muscles, the sweat beneath his coat—and something else underneath. A warmth in the ground. Not intense. But there.

He moved closer, cautiously, as if approaching an animal that might be sleeping, might be dead, or might only be pretending. The stories of being cooked flickered briefly. He pushed them away.

"He was stupid," he muttered. "I'm being careful."

He searched for what the others had described: cracks in the rock, places where the ground was darker, crevices from which no smoke emerged, but a feeling as if the air were being pushed from behind. He found it. A narrow incision, half-hidden between two scorched bushes that looked as if they had tried to escape and been burned in the process.

As he stood before it, he heard it. Not loud – but clearly enough that his heart briefly changed rhythm. Slow, deep breathing. No wind. No animal. An in and out, as if a gigantic lung somewhere inside was turning over air.

Every rational part of him said, "Go back."

The other part, the larger one, said: “Now you’re already here. Just a hand’s breadth away. Just a glance.”

He unhooked the water hose and drank. The wine he'd taken from the barrel by the hall burned his throat, but gave him a feeling of courage. Courage is often just well-placed numbing.

Hrothmar crawled. No heroic silhouette. No man with a banner. A man in the dirt, his hands in the dust, his back bent, his head ready to hit rock. The crevice was narrow, scraping against his shoulders and hips, smelling of stone, old smoke, and something metallic he couldn't name.

Inside it was darker, but not black. There was a faint glow, not like torches, not like moonlight, but like the smoldering of coals beneath ash. Enough to make out contours.

He lay still for a moment, listening. The breathing was louder. Closer. The floor vibrated as if it were resting on a chest.

Beowulf knew nothing of this creeping. At the same time, he was standing at the rampart, looking in the same direction, but miles away. He felt the jolt in his bones, as if someone in the distance had pulled a lever.

Wulfgar stepped next to him. "Again."

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “He is moving.”

"Perhaps only in their sleep."

"Perhaps also because some idiot thinks he has to grab his teeth right now."

Down below, in the belly of the mountain, Hrothmar saw it. At first, it was just a flat surface. Dark, scaly, vast. Then he realized it was only a small fragment of something beyond his comprehension. He didn't see a whole being. Only a part of a body, lying in the darkness like a coiled river.

The gold lay scattered around like dirt. Mountains of metal, disorderly, pushed back and forth, partly melted, partly dull. Cups, rings, chains, weapons that no hand would ever wield again. He saw them—and his greed howled like a dog that finally finds an open gate.

"Just one thing," he thought. "Something small. Something I can wear. Something to prove I was here."

He crawled sideways, his hands cautious, his heart beating too loudly. With each breath of the thing, the ground vibrated, a slight up and down, like a boat rocking over a deep wave.

His gaze fell upon a cup. Not large, not set with precious stones, but clean, intact, with engraved lines. It lay a little apart, as if someone had kicked it out of the pile.

Hrothmar's fingers tingled. He stretched, inch by inch, as if trying to quiet the noise inside him. His fingertips touched metal. It was hot. Not burning, but as if it had been near a fire for a long time.

"Now," he thought. "Now or never."

He closed his hand around it. The metal burned, but he held on tight. He pulled the cup toward him, slowly, as if afraid an invisible cord might yank him back. Nothing happened. Not yet.

Up in the kingdom, all was quiet. Pigs, smoke, strife. Down in the belly of the mountain, a scale shifted, unseen by anyone.

Hrothmar crawled backward, the cup pressed to his chest, his heart in his throat. Every muscle in him screamed at him to go faster. Every instinct told him that quick movements would awaken things. He settled somewhere in between.

When he reached the crevice, he looked back one last time. He couldn't remember why later. Perhaps it was vanity—the idea of wanting to look the monster in the face before running away. Perhaps it was simply stupidity.

He saw one eye.

It wasn't fully open. Just a slit, but enough for a sliver of golden light to penetrate. No human gaze. A deep, alien something that didn't look at him, but registered him. Like one registers a breath of wind. Or a mosquito bite.

His breathing changed rhythm. It became shorter. Scarce.

Hrothmar squeezed into the crevice, still clutching the cup to his chest. His back brushed against rock, his knees banged against stone, his fingers dug into cold earth.

Inside him was a hysterical laugh that couldn't escape. "I did it," he thought. "I really did it. I was inside. I saw it. And I took something with me. Me. Hrothmar. The one nobody knows."

The rock above him moved. Not really – but that's how it felt.

The dragon turned over in its sleep. Only now it wasn't sleep anymore, but that impatient rolling around just before waking up.

Outside, miles away, Beowulf saw a brief, red flicker in the distance. Not a long streak, not a tremendous glow. Just a short flash.

"Did you see that?" asked Wulfgar.

Beowulf nodded. "A thief," he said softly. "Or a cup. Or both."

And somewhere on the slope, where the hill met the world, a man crawled out of a crevice, with burned hands and a cup in his arms that burned brighter than anything he had ever possessed.

He thought he had won.

The world disagreed.

Hrothmar stumbled down the slope like someone who had fallen out of a bed that was far too big. The ground beneath his feet felt wrong, as if with every step it were asking, "Are you sure?" His hands burned. Not just a little. The skin was reddened, cracked, and split open in places. Every touch of the cup felt like he was holding a piece of living ember.

He wouldn't let go. It would have been enough to open his arm, drop the thing in the dirt, and run until his lungs burst. But this wasn't just a cup anymore. It was proof. Proof that he'd been inside. Proof that he was different from those who just stood around listening to stories.

The air around him had warmed. Not like summer sunshine, more like breath. Behind him, higher up the slope, something creaked. Not loudly. A dull, heavy pushing, as if a huge body were shifting position in its sleep. No roar, no flames, just this shifting weight.

"Don't turn around," he gasped. "Don't turn around, don't stumble, don't let go."

It's strange how small the world becomes when you're holding something like this in your hands. No kingdom, no king, no dragon. Just you, your burning skin, and the thought: "If I make it to the next bend, I'm through."

He made it to the next bend. The earth vibrated briefly, a shallow tremor, as if someone were dragging a knife along the ground. He heard a dull rumble that didn't really come through the air—more through his bones.

Far away, at the same time, Beowulf paused mid-sentence. He was sitting with a few advisors over a map, discussing supplies, when the table shook slightly. No great shock, just that "I was there" feeling.

"Not again," Wulfgar muttered.

“This time it’s different,” said Beowulf. He couldn’t explain it. But the tone was higher, sharper, less like sleep and more like someone groping for a knife in bed.

Hrothmar ran until his legs were nothing but reflexes. He stumbled through a hollow, tore his calf open on the brambles, barely noticing. His entire body was now just a vehicle for carrying the cup. The rest of him trailed behind.

When he was finally far enough away from the hill that the humming subsided, he dropped down behind a boulder. He gasped, his pulse pounding in his head, his mouth as dry as old lime.

He looked at the thing in his hands. Gold. Heavy. The engravings seemed blurry because his fingers were trembling and his eyes were watering with pain. In his imagination, the moment had been different. He had thought it would feel like victory. Like liberation. Like, I don't know, divine favor. It felt like guilt. Hot, sticky, without a grip.

"I did it," he whispered anyway. He needed the words to keep from completely falling apart. "I did it. I was in. Nobody else was."

He wrapped the cup hastily in his coat to protect his hands at least a little. The fabric began to smell of burnt fat, even though there was no fire nearby.

The way back took longer. Not because the path was longer. Because every step was now accompanied by a different weight. He saw a crack in the ground in every shadow, a finger reaching for him in every branch. Once he stopped because he thought he saw a red glimmer behind him. When he turned around, there was only darkness.

"I imagine things," he muttered. "Of course. After something like that."

He reached the vicinity of the settlements at dawn. He wasn't sneaking. That would have attracted more attention. He walked like someone who was simply tired. That wasn't even a lie.

In a small grove outside one of the villages, he buried the cup. Not deep. Just enough so that it wouldn't be visible to passersby. He marked the spot in his mind: three crooked birch trees, a rock with a crack that looked like an open mouth.

"I'll come back tonight," he whispered to the earth. "When my head is clearer. When I have a plan."

Plans. As if the world had time for his plans.

Back near the hall, he did what one does after a night of foolishness: he acted as if nothing had happened. He helped in the yard, hauled wood, listened to the others' practical chatter. Nobody asked where he had been. Nobody noticed that his gaze sometimes drifted away, towards where the hill lay.

Beowulf didn't notice. How could he? The king sees the grand movements: armies, fires, breaches in the wall, the sea when it looks wrong. He doesn't see the man who goes to the river and comes back a little different.

But he noticed the air was different. A messenger from the northeast reported at midday a thin wisp of smoke coming from a crevice in the hill. Not long, not high, but with a smell that was more metallic than woody.

"Perhaps it's normal," said one of the advisors.

“Please refrain from using the word ‘normal’ in the future,” growled Beowulf.

In the evening, a breeze picked up. Not a storm, just that restless shifting of the air that made the torches flicker nervously. There was no unusual smell. Not yet.

Hrothmar made up an excuse from somewhere. "I'm on guard duty," he said when someone asked why he was out so early again, wearing his coat and carrying a water bag. Guard duty was a good word. Vague, but important-sounding. Nobody asked more precisely where or for whom.

He crept back to the grove he had remembered. The ground was cool, the moon hung crooked above the trees. He dug. His fingers ached, but he had survived worse pain. He felt the metal before he saw it. Still warm.

He pulled the cup out. This time he examined it properly. The engravings seemed deeper, as if they had eaten their way inwards during the time it lay buried in the ground. Lines that curled, becoming heads, mouths, something that looked like flames if you stared long enough.

"You are mine," whispered Hrothmar. "I got you. I did what no one else dares to do."

The greed within him was no longer a worm. More like a dog with foam at the mouth. Images raced through his mind: him, standing in the hall, slamming his cup down on the table. "I was there. I saw it. I went in while you were all drinking." The faces, the astonishment, the envy, the respect. Perhaps a ring afterward, a place closer to the fire, his name in a song.

He also considered the other possibility: that they would immediately shout at him, that the king would rage, that they would bind him and drag him back to the hill as a sacrifice. He couldn't assess which scenario was more likely.

"I have to see him," he thought. "The king. If I bring him this thing, he can't pretend it's all just talk anymore. Then he'll have to do something. And I'm the one who made him do it."

It happened at the exact moment he stood up, cup in his arm.

It wasn't a gradual transition. No "maybe, possibly, could be." It was like a slap in the face. The air suddenly became warm. Not from the outside. From within. A gust of wind swept through the grove, which smelled of ash, even though nothing was burning.

In the sky, in the direction of the hill, something rose that was not morning. A red glow, at first faint, then stronger, as if someone were carving a door into the rock, and behind it was not darkness, but another kind of daylight – one that wanted to burn everything.

Hrothmar stumbled out of the grove, his gaze turned east. Above the line where the hill lay, a flag of fire now stood. Not a clear beam, but rather a broad, drawn-out flame licking at the sky.

He still had just enough sense to know what that meant: He hadn't stolen from a sleeping animal. He had woken it up. For real.

"Shit," he whispered. His voice was barely audible against the rumble that was now coming across the fields. Not thunder. Something deeper. A mixture of crashing, roaring, and hissing. As if rocks were screaming and the air was boiling.

At the same time, people in the courtyard in front of the hall looked up. A child saw the light first. Children have less debris in their eyes that obstructs their vision.

“There!” it shrieked, pointing with a much too small finger in the direction of the northeast.

The sky above the hills had turned red. Not like sunrise or sunset, but like a wound someone had cut into the horizon. A flicker, a rearing head, a greedy devouring of darkness.

Beowulf came out of the hall like a man who knew too well what awaited him outside to hurry. He walked, not ran. He stood in the courtyard, following the glances of the others.

He saw the glow. The movement in the red. Not clear, not in shape, but there. An up and down, as if something enormous were swimming beneath the surface of a sea of fire.

"Well," he said dryly, more to himself than to the others, "now the wildfire would start."

The first messengers arrived even before they could be seen. Smoke. A new smell on the wind: burnt wood, burnt grass, something burning. Not a normal fire. It smelled sharper, more bitter, with a metallic tinge, as if someone were melting swords.

In the northeast, not a single house was burning. Not a single small field fire that a few men could extinguish with buckets and curses. It was as if someone had dipped a brush of fire into the landscape and begun to draw broad strokes.

Hrothmar stood there, cup in hand, his gaze fixed on what he had unleashed. At first, he didn't believe it was because of him. You don't give yourself that much power, no matter how sick your vanity is.

Then he heard it. Among the roars, the hisses, the crashes, there was a sound he recognized. A sound like it came from a cave. Only this time, not muffled by rock. A voice, if you could call it that. Deep, furious, ancient.

He pressed the cup closer to him. The gold burned deeper into his skin, as if offended at being outside.

"I'm bringing him back," he stammered. "I'm bringing him back, I swear. I just wanted to... I just wanted to..."

He didn't finish the sentence because it didn't matter in the slightest. The fire doesn't care what you wanted. It only knows that you're burning.

For a moment, there was an honest silence in the hall, in which everyone simultaneously realized that the stories were over and now came the part where you realize how little you are worth.

"Gather," Beowulf said tersely. "Messengers, men, anyone with a horse who can still breathe halfway decently. We need eyes nearby. Hands to pull out what can still be pulled out. And a head that won't go crazy when it sees the sky burning."

"Yours?" asked Wulfgar.

Beowulf nodded. "Mine. For now."

Hrothmar ran. He didn't know exactly where. Away from the fire, away from the hill, towards the hall, towards the king, with the goblet in his arms and the feeling of being a torch that nobody wanted.

Behind him, above him, below him, the fire began to spread. Grass that had never seen a spark began to sizzle. Trees that had stood still for decades became matchsticks. The wind did what it always does: it blew. Only this time, it had more power than usual.

A thief, a cup, a wildfire.

The equation wrote itself.

Hrothmar ran until the path beneath his feet was nothing but a blurry line. The cup pounded against his chest like a second heart, beating in only one rhythm: too fast. Every breath burned, his hands were two red lumps of pain, but he held onto the thing as if he himself would otherwise fall apart.

Behind him, the world roared. It wasn't an ordinary fire. Ordinary fires have pauses. They crackle, smolder, stumble, and die out somewhere if the wind is blowing the wrong way or the ground is too wet. This sounded as if someone had given the flame legs. Something raced down the slope, leaping over ditches, across the dry grass, along the edges of the fields that had for so long pretended to be nothing but earth.

The sky in the northeast was no longer a sky, but an open wound. Red, orange, black. Plumes of smoke rose like crooked columns, and between them flickered something Hrothmar had seen in a dream, but which was now far too real: flashing scales in the firelight. A shadow that moved, large, irregular. Not a mountain. Not a storm. Something in between.

He almost stumbled when the ground beneath him twitched briefly. Not like before the wildfire. Different. As if someone deep down had laughed.

In one of the villages on the edge of what would later become the fire belt, an old man stood in front of his hut and shouted at the flames. Not because he thought they were listening. Because he had nothing else left to throw at them. His wife tugged at his arm, the children cried, the chickens fluttered around the yard in panic until some spark fell on them and they became more stench than feathers.

"Get into the field!" someone shouted, "Away from the houses!" But the fire didn't want houses. It took everything. Thatched roofs, fences, planks, faces.

The first messengers who rode towards the hall looked as if they had been run through an oven. Skin reddened, hair singed at the tips, eyes large and vacant. One of them didn't even

make it to the gate, but collapsed in the ditch, his helmet half in the muck, his mouth open as if he wanted to say something, but he had already run out of breath.

Beowulf didn't hear the reports only once he was in the hall. He heard them even before the men began to speak. The horses smelled of burnt hide, the wind carried a taste like iron on the tongue. He stood in the courtyard, saw the smoke, saw the line of flames stretching across the landscape like a drunken painter.

"How far?" he asked the first messenger who was still able to stand.

“Fast,” he gasped. “Too fast. It’s devouring the dry fields, the hedges, the sheds. Some slopes are sliding, some are simply ablaze, without any sign of where it started. It’s…” He searched for a word that wasn’t “hell” and gave up. “It’s just everywhere.”

The men in the courtyard suddenly felt very young again. A horde that wanted to participate without knowing how. Shields were fetched as if they could block flames. Water barrels were rolled as if a few buckets would make any difference against a wall of fire that stretched across entire hills.

“We’re riding out,” said Wulfgar. “I’ll take what I can get. We can’t stand here and watch everything burn down.”

“You ride,” said Beowulf. “Not with an army. With swift men. You bring out what can still walk. You try to build bridges of fire wherever you see a chance—ditches, plowed strips, anything. But you don’t fight the flames. You fight the paths they want to take.”

Wulfgar nodded, half in the saddle, half cursing. "And you?"

Beowulf glanced northeast, where the sky continued to burn, then back at the hall. "I'll stay here," he said. "Until I know exactly what we're dealing with. Someone has to stay and eat the news while you get burned out there."

Wulfgar looked at him as if he wanted to disagree, but then didn't. "I'm bringing you pictures," he simply said. "So you have something to do in your dreams."

They rode off. A narrow line of horses, swords, faces that had more questions than answers. The courtyard lagged behind, vibrating briefly and then sinking into a strange kind of silence, in which the children no longer cried and the women no longer cursed, but only worked faster.

Hrothmar arrived shortly after. No horse, no retinue. Just a man, sweaty, sunburned, with a coat that glittered. He stumbled through the gate, nearly run over by a cart full of buckets of water.

"Get out of the way!" one of them yelled.

Hrothmar stumbled sideways, landing half in the mud, then scrambled back to his feet, clutching the cup closer to his body. He felt every beat of his heart inside it, as if the thing were alive.

No one in the courtyard consciously noticed him. They saw a figure like many others: some battered bastard who either needed help or was in the way. A boy who was running past with a bundle of blankets paused briefly, staring at the gold trim that shimmered from the coat.

"What is that?"

"Nothing," Hrothmar growled, pulling the fabric tighter. "Keep walking."

The boy kept walking, but the image remained. Another spark in the straw of rumors.

Hrothmar pressed on towards the hall. Every step was difficult. Not because of tiredness. Because of what was about to happen. He had so often imagined what it would be like to stand before Beowulf, with prey in his hand and a sentence in his mouth that would make him great.

Now his tongue was burning in his throat.

He entered the hall. The smoke from outside had clung to their clothes; the air tasted of fear, though no one used the word. Beowulf wasn't sitting on the chair. He stood before it, legs apart, his hands on the table as if he had to hold the kingdom down so it wouldn't slip off the board.

They saw each other. First Hrothmar saw him, then the king saw the man who looked as if he had been outside longer than was healthy.

“Sir,” Hrothmar began, his voice almost breaking. He cleared his throat, feeling the gold grow heavier in his hands. “Sir, I… I was at the hill.”

A few of the men in the hall turned around. Some instinctively reached for the handles of their weapons, as if one had to pronounce the word "hill".

Beowulf's gaze narrowed. "You were... where?"

“At the Fire Mountain,” Hrothmar blurted out. Now it was out. “In the cave. At the…” He swallowed. “At what’s inside.”

The air in the room became denser, as if someone had poured water into it.

“Show,” said Beowulf. No roar. No curse. Just that one word, heavy as an axe blade.

Hrothmar opened his cloak. Slowly, as if he were cutting himself open. The goblet shimmered in the gloom, warm, unnatural. Even the torches looked paler by comparison.

A murmur went through the hall. One whispered "by the gods," another said something that sounded like the sound of someone losing their nerve.

Beowulf approached. He didn't look like a king at all, more like a man observing himself as he was late.

"You got that out of his stomach?" he asked.

Hrothmar nodded. “I was inside,” he said quickly, the words tumbling over each other. “I heard the humming, felt the breathing, I saw the treasure, Lord, it is more than…”

“More than we’ve ever had in the hall,” Beowulf finished dryly. “Yes. I could have figured that out even without your report.”

He didn't reach for the cup. He only saw Hrothmar's hands. The blisters, the torn wounds, the raw flesh that still wouldn't release its grip.

"And you think he'll let that slide?" he asked quietly.

Hrothmar avoided his gaze. “I… I thought…”

"You thought you were smarter than the first idiot to be boiled," Beowulf snarled. "You thought if you were more careful, faster, quieter, you'd be one of those the bards would later sing about. You believed that thing down there wouldn't notice if something was taken away from it. You seriously think a creature that's been lying on its own dung for centuries wouldn't notice if there was suddenly a hole in the pile?"

The hall was silent. Hrothmar stood there, small, burned, with a piece of gold in his hand that was heavier than any guilt.

“I wanted…” he tried, “…I wanted to prove that it’s real. That we… that we have to act.”

“We absolutely must act now,” said Beowulf. “Congratulations. You have made a war out of a noise.”

Someone at the back of the hall muttered, "He's to blame," and the word spread before anyone could stop it. Blame.

Beowulf snatched it up in the air, like catching a fly. "No," he said. "He's not solely to blame. He's just the last missing piece in the heap. The greed, the fear, the chatter, the songs, the stories we've all swallowed—that's just as much to blame. This cup is merely the period at the end of a very long sentence we've been writing for years."

He did not take the cup from Hrothmar.

"You know what that means," he finally said.

Hrothmar understood. He wasn't clever, but he wasn't that stupid either. "I'll take it back," he whispered. "I'll go back there. I'll put it back. Maybe..."

"Perhaps it will forgive you. Perhaps it will devour you first. Perhaps the difference doesn't matter," Beowulf interrupted.

Eadgils stepped forward, the grey one with too many calculations on his mind. "Sir," he said softly, "if you send him... isn't that..."

“…exactly what he deserves?” Beowulf asked coldly. “Or what? That I give him a ring and say ‘well done’?”

Hrothmar stood there, knowing his life had narrowed. A narrow path, one direction. No more forks in the road. He had opened the door to the belly of the hill. Now he would enter it again—or someone else would.

"I'm leaving," he said. "I'm going back."

Beowulf looked at him, for a long time. There was something in his face that was rarely seen: pity and anger at the same time.

“You are going,” he confirmed. “But not alone. I want to know how far the fire has progressed. I want eyes there that don’t just see gold. Wulfgar is already out. I’m sending men after him who think before they act.”

He turned his gaze away from the cup, as if he would otherwise become stupid himself.

"Bury that thing," he said suddenly. "Here. Close to the hall. Not deep. And nobody touches it until I say what happens to it. If the dragon really wants it, he'll find it anyway, no matter how deep you dig. But I don't want some other idiot grabbing a bit of 'glory' before we march off."

They went outside the hall. Hrothmar knelt, his hands trembling, the earth cold and wet, the cup heavy as a judgment. He placed it in the pit they had dug in the hard-trodden ground.

As the earth fell onto the gold, there was this sound for a moment. Very faint. Like a distant, deep hum. As if someone below had briefly held their breath.

Beowulf heard it. So did the others.

"It knows," Hrothmar murmured.

“Of course it knows,” said Beowulf. “That’s the difference between us and it: We only realized what was happening when the sky was on fire. It noticed when your fingers touched the pile.”

They filled in the hole. A few footprints, a smooth surface. Nothing to make the place special. Only Beowulf, Hrothmar, and a few others knew what lay beneath.

“You are not resting now,” Beowulf said to Hrothmar. “You will eat, you will drink, you will have your hands bound. Then you will set out again. Not for gold. Not for glory. You are going because you were the first to feel the breath. Perhaps you need this to understand what you have set in motion.”

Hrothmar nodded. He didn't feel like the chosen one. More like a man whose rope just wasn't quite tightened yet.

The wind shifted. From the northeast came the full stench of the wildfire. Not just burnt wood, but earth turning to ash, flesh to smoke, dreams simply evaporating.

Beowulf stood there, taking a deep breath, as if he had to get used to the stench before riding towards it.

"One thief, one cup, one wildfire," he said quietly. "And that's just the beginning. Tomorrow we won't just have fire. Tomorrow we'll have ashes."

Night fell over the realm, but it was not dark. The hills in the northeast continued to glow, as if someone had decided to create their own, uglier firmament there.

And somewhere, deep beneath that light, lay a being with open eyes and a hole in its treasure that meant more to it than all the lives above.

The fire ran. The fields waited.

CHAPTER 23 – When the Fields Turned to Ash

The morning after, the land looked as if someone had decided to quit God and do a bad job themselves. The fields, which yesterday had smelled of work and sweat, now smelled of burnt hope. From the hilltop far into the hinterland stretched a trail, as wide as a lie told for too long: black, gray, and in between, that dirty red of lingering embers that refuse to die completely.

Beowulf didn't ride off immediately. That was the problem: he was old enough to know that the second step is more important than the first. The youngsters wanted to jump right in, hoof to hoof, sword in hand, as if they could fight fire with metal. He let them out with Wulfgar, the first leg, last night. Now he was taking the second, harder ride: the one where you can no longer save anyone, only count.

The horses disliked the path. Long before reaching the burned area, they flared their nostrils, snorted, and treaded nervously, as if they knew there was something ahead that had nothing to do with ordinary fire. The ground beneath their hooves was patchy: here still grass, there already gray dust that kicked up with every step and settled on fur, armor, and skin like a polite warning.

The closer they came, the quieter it became. Not a single bird circling above the scorched fields. Not a single insect buzzing. Even the wind seemed unsure whether it belonged there.

The first field looked as if someone had swept across it with a giant broom of flames. The stalks were gone, only stumps remained, black and crumbly. A few charred posts where a fence had once stood. Beyond them: the remains of a farm. No house left, just the idea of one – outlines of blackened stones, a chimney leaning like a man who's seen too much.

A body lay in the yard. Or what was left of it. The form was still there, somehow. Human, yes. Hands, feet, head. But everything was black, cracked, like wood gets cracks when it dries too quickly. The teeth gleamed because the rest of the face had melted away.

Beowulf dismounted. It cost him more than he was willing to show. His knee made noises befitting old men, but not what he saw before him.

"Don't touch," he said when one of the younger ones tried to lean closer. "He's touched enough for all of us."

He had no witty remark ready that would have improved the situation. There was nothing better.

A little further on, two children sat against a wall that was only half a meter thick. They sat there as if waiting for someone to come around the corner with bread. Their faces were smeared with soot, their hair singed, their eyes dry. Tears were a luxury when the body had already lost too much fluid.

“Who belongs to you?” asked Beowulf.

The older man looked at him, that kind of look that doesn't suit such a small face. "Everyone," he said. "And no one else."

Wulfgar, who had been riding back and forth in the area for hours to see what was still standing, arrived. He looked as if he had personally tried to stop the fire with his face.

"How many?" Beowulf asked softly.

“Too many to count them all,” said Wulfgar. “Too few to call it a real war. Houses gone. Livestock reduced to bones. A few people who thought they could shout against fire with water. Most ran somewhere they thought it wouldn’t be so hot.”

"And that thing?"

Wulfgar looked towards the hill, where smoke still lingered, as if someone had tried to nail the sky there. "I didn't see it," he said. "But you hear it. Between the crackling, between the crashing of falling beams. A roar, sometimes, like a mountain swallowing itself in its sleep. And now and then a burst of flame that needs no direction to engulf everything."

Beowulf nodded. He looked at the ash beneath his boots. Every step left a print that immediately became half-covered in dust. No one could keep a track here. Everything was a trail.

They rode on. The land was no longer their land. It was a scorched wasteland. Here a cow, shriveled into a black heap, its horns still clean, macabrely white. There a wagon, half-melted, the wood gone, the iron rims like bent fingers.

People who had made it to the water in time stood by a stream. Wet shirts, burned hands, faces covered in soot and shock. They had taken everything that hadn't run away: a few goats, a chest without a lid, a sack whose contents were now a mystery.

“The wind has changed,” said a woman who recognized Beowulf. One who, months before, had stood before him, defiant because she refused to leave the hill. Now she had no hut to cling to. “First the fire was on the other side. Then the wind changed its mind. You couldn’t refill the bucket fast enough before the roof burned away.”

"How many?" Beowulf asked again. It was a stupid reflex.

"Enough," she said. "Enough that I don't want to count anymore. Is that enough?"

He nodded. That was enough. It was enough after the first burned goat, the first charred child, the first tree that stood and yet was dead. The rest was just bookkeeping.

Beyond the burned areas began this strange no-man's-land: half-charred meadows, trees with blackened sides, as if they had turned away too late. People stood around like ghosts, unable to decide whether to stay or leave.

One of them grabbed the bridle of Beowulf's horse as he passed by. Not aggressively. More desperately.

“Sir,” he said, his voice cracking. “You’ve slain monsters before. Why don’t you do anything?”

It was that sentence. The one that hung among all the burned things. "Why aren't you doing anything?"

Beowulf allowed the man to stare at him. His face was covered in soot, his eyes red, not just from the smoke.

“I’m doing something,” he said calmly. “I’m counting. I’m observing. I’m making a mental note of what it has taken from us. I’m sending people to get out those who are still trapped inside. And I’m trying to find a way in my mind to go there and not die in vain.”

"That's not enough," the man gasped.

“I know,” said Beowulf. “But lying would be worse.”

The man let go, as if he had suddenly realized how weak his fingers were.

Later, as they stood with the horses at the edge of the burned zone and looked from there at the line of destruction, Beowulf felt as if he were looking at a painting made by a drunkard who knew only two colors: black and rage.

"That was just a cough," Wulfgar said quietly. "It was just stretching."

"Yes," murmured Beowulf. "And in the process, a few years' work by a hundred people was incinerated."

They rode along the edge, like people groping around a wound without touching it. At one point, the fire had leaped across a stream wide enough to stop ordinary flames. The grass on the other side was just gray. Beowulf saw footprints in the burned furrow. Not human. Large. With claws. Deeply etched into the ground that had once been a field.

“There,” said Wulfgar.

Beowulf dismounted. He squatted down beside the track, as far as his bones allowed. He placed his hand in the print. His fingers almost disappeared into it. Warm. No longer hot. But warm.

“Now we have him,” he murmured. “Not just as a dream. Not just as a hill. As what he is: a damned beast with fire in its belly and strides like a small storm.”

The men behind them exchanged glances. One of them actually whispered something like, "By the gods..." and then bit his lip, as if it were forbidden to involve the gods in this.

“Not ‘gods’,” Beowulf growled, without looking up. “This is older than your prayers and less interested in you. Call it what it is: a problem.”

They searched for survivors. They found a few. A woman who had huddled with her children in an earthen cellar where they had nearly suffocated, but at least hadn't been roasted alive. An old dog who had been rolling in a ditch, wet and shivering, his paws burned. A boy who claimed he'd seen the cattle briefly—"just a shadow, sir, but large, so large that the sky behind it disappeared for a moment"—before his voice broke.

They found more dead. Some whole. Many half-dead. There are things that humankind didn't think to see when it invented itself. Bodies where it's unclear where they begin and end. An arm hanging from a charred beam. A figure that had died fleeing, hands outstretched, feet pointing towards safety, head thrown back as if it had turned one last time to see everything burning.

Beowulf didn't take any of it lightly. He simply couldn't anymore. There was too much in his mind, layering itself like ancient dust: Grendel, the hall, the lake, the mother in the mire, Huglac's belly, all the others whose names meant nothing more to him.

And now this. Ashes as far as the eye could see.

“He’s just testing,” said Eadgils, who had eventually caught up with them on a smaller horse because he refused to stop thinking at the edge of the arena. “He’s testing how far he can go, how far he can blow before his lungs tire. Dragons aren’t storms that rage aimlessly. They have patterns.”

“Pattern,” Beowulf repeated. “Tell that to the children who have no home tonight.”

But he knew what the old man meant. The thing hadn't burned down everything it could have. It had drawn lines. Randomly, it seemed. But perhaps that was just the human perspective, wanting to see order where there is none. Or failing to recognize it where there is.

Beowulf stopped at the edge of a field that was half black, half still yellow, and looked towards the hill. He couldn't see it, of course. But the direction was so clear, as if someone had painted a line across the sky.

“This,” he said into the air, “is the preview. The gods, or whoever, have given us a sample. A small cut so we know how deep the blade can go.”

"So?" asked Wulfgar. "What do we do with it?"

Beowulf looked at his hands. They were old, scarred, the knuckles thick, the fingers sometimes stiff. He thought of Hrothmar's burned fins, of the cup beneath the courtyard, of all the gold in the belly of the mound, now trembling because a piece was missing.

“We’re stopping pretending we can just ride this out,” he said. “We’re stopping hoping the hill will calm down if we just keep on doing our bit. We’re starting to prepare for something bigger than our little reckoning with fields, cattle, and fame.”

“So you’re going there,” Eadgils said. Not as a question. As a statement.

Beowulf laughed, briefly, roughly. "Where else? Should I wait until he shows up here because he smells his toys under my yard?"

He looked once more over the burned fields. The ash swirled with every gust of wind, settling on his armor, beard, and tongue. It tasted of past lives.

"You will die," said the Grey Man.

“I should have died years ago,” Beowulf replied. “I’m just the one who survived. Maybe I was only ever meant for this shit. Everything before was training.”

The men behind him were silent. Some had tears in their eyes, but not because of him. Because of what had once been their work, their country, their everyday lives. Others looked at him with that foolish hope that he would make everything right again, just because he had seen a few more monsters than they had.

He slowly turned his horse around. The hoof pressed into the ash, leaving an imprint that would be erased in a few minutes.

“We’re salvaging what can still be saved,” he said. “We’re bringing in the displaced as best we can. Then I’ll go and think. And when I’m done, I’ll go and die. And try to take as many flames with me as my old bones can carry.”

No one laughed. It wasn't a joke.

They rode back, through grey air, over black earth, past things that had once been alive. Behind them lay a land that was no longer theirs, but belonged to the fire.

The fields had turned to ash.

The only thing that hadn't yet been burned was the decision. But it was already smoldering in Beowulf's breast.

Back in the hall, the ashes brought smoke with them. Not the usual hall smoke, the kind that speaks of grease, wood, and bad beer. This time, something else clung to the clothes of the men coming from the fire. A sharp, metallic, bitter whiff, as if someone had vaporized blood and poured it into everyone's pores.

Beowulf didn't sit down as he climbed the steps. The chair was there, as always, but he walked past it, stopping instead in front of the table like someone with too much weight on his back to pretend he could sit comfortably.

The men who were already there fell silent when he entered. Not out of respect. Out of curiosity and fear. They wanted to know if the king looked different when he rose from the ashes. He didn't. Only more tired. Tiredness is the last costume you have left when you've worn all the heroic poses.

“Reports,” said Eadgils, the Grey, even though he already knew quite a bit. He wanted the others to hear it. Loudly.

Beowulf looked at them all. The petty princes with their too-smooth hands. The warriors who knew more songs than real battles. The old dogs who knew when it was best to keep their mouths shut.

“The fields,” he began, “are now over there in a color for which we have no word, because we never wanted to see it. Black isn’t enough. It’s not just burnt grass that lies there. It’s years. Diligence. Stupidity. Hope. All nicely spread in a thin layer that creeps into your boots when you walk across it.”

No one dared to clear their throat.

"A few are still alive," he continued. "A few more are not. Those who made it to the water were lucky. Those who tried to untie their pigs were not. Those who thought they could stop the fire with a bucket now have no hands. You can imagine the rest."

"How far?" someone asked. The voice sounded as if it were afraid to hear the answer and at the same time afraid not to hear it.

Beowulf traced a line with his finger on the aerial map of the hall. "From the northern slopes down to the lower fields. An arc. Not the whole world, just a piece. A warning stroke. If he had wanted to, he could have gone further."

“He,” the man repeated. “So… you think…”

"I don't believe anything anymore," Beowulf growled. "I saw it. Footprints as big as your accursed beds. Ground warm hours after the fire has moved on. And a roar that goes right through your bones even when you think you're far enough away. Call it what you will: dragon, demon, whim of the gods. I don't care. It's there."

The word "dragon" no longer hung in the corners as just a rumor. It stood in the middle of the room, naked, without meter.

"Then... then we must..." One of the lesser princes wrestled with a plan he knew from old stories. "...make sacrifices. Perhaps... perhaps it wants gold. Or cattle. Or..."

“It has gold,” Beowulf cut him off. “More than you could count in your lifetime, even if you started at one and never stopped. It wants nothing from us. It only wants to keep what it has. Everything else is collateral damage.”

“But we could… negotiate?”

Beowulf laughed. It sounded like a cough that had given up on being polite. "Go and negotiate," he said. "Take your best cloak, a few nice words, but you can leave the sword right here. Perhaps it will understand your polite words while it blows your skin off. I'd like to see you explain to it what 'boundary' means."

The hall didn't even flinch at the harsh words. Everyone had already moved on inwardly: they were conjuring up their own images. Courtyards ablaze. Children who never woke up. A sky that no longer belonged to them.

“How many people have we lost?” Eadgils asked matter-of-factly.

“Enough to fill a new hall,” said Beowulf. “Too little to say the kingdom is over. Just enough to hurt, but not enough to learn from it if we now pretend it’s all over again.”

He looked into silent faces. It was as if he were standing before a wall of flesh, in which every stone was a different doubt.

“We… can cultivate the fields again,” one man spoke up, his belt laden with more keys than weapons. “The ashes… they nourish the soil. Maybe… in a few years…”

“In a few years, the cattle will be on a different hillside,” Beowulf growled. “You talk of sowing, while the fire has just learned how well we burn. Wake up.”

Wulfgar arrived, still covered in smoke, his helmet tucked under his arm. "We got a few out," he reported, "but not enough. Those who made it are clinging to us as if we weren't just men with swords, but walls. And the others..." He shrugged. "They're now part of the smoke creeping in here."

A warrior at the back of the hall, young and with slightly too clean armor, shouted: “We must strike back. We can’t just stand by and watch our people get roasted!”

“Strike back,” Beowulf repeated slowly, as if trying out a new word. “How do you imagine that working? With buckets? With signs? Do you want to stand there and say, ‘Stop, dragon, this is the border, this is the kingdom, you must not burn here’?”

The boy blushed, but his chin remained defiant. "We can attack it while it sleeps. A troop. Chosen ones. Just like you did back then abroad..."

“Back then I was young, drunk, and even stupider than you,” Beowulf interrupted. “I thought if I shouted loud enough and hit hard enough, the world would eventually stop. Now I know: it just keeps shaking somewhere else.”

For a moment he wanted to scream at the boy. To tell him how many he had seen die, all of whom thought "We'll fight back" and ended up nothing but smoke. Instead, he took a breath.

“But you’re not entirely wrong,” he said then, more quietly. “If we do nothing, he’ll keep eating. Not today. But soon. Dragons have time. We don’t.”

That was the worst part: there was no good plan. Only bad ones, and the certainty that doing nothing was the worst thing of all.

Later, as the council dragged on like cold porridge and everyone tried to sound clever when they were actually just scared, Beowulf stood at the edge, leaning against a pillar and watching the men throw words around as if they were shields.

"We're pulling the people back further." – "We're reinforcing the walls." – "We're sending scouts closer." – "We're praying."

“Pray,” he murmured. “Perhaps someone is listening to you. Perhaps they’re just laughing over there in their beautiful hall of the gods, passing golden goblets around.”

He thought of Hrothmar. Of the cup, which was no longer an ember, but a buried threat. Of the moment when they had shoveled the earth over it and that dull rumble had reverberated through the ground.

“We are connected,” he thought. “Whether we like it or not. We have a piece of his heart under our farm. And he has a piece of our world roasted in his belly.”

In one corner of the hall, two princes were arguing quietly but fiercely.

“We can’t move the whole empire because of one mountain,” one of them hissed. “Are we supposed to give up everything we’ve built?”

“If we stay, that bastard will eventually burn us to the ground,” the other hissed back. “Then you can count your beautiful hall in ashes.”

“We could try sacrificing something to him,” a third person chimed in. “Gold, cattle, or even a few of those damned thieves who roam around here. Maybe that will calm him down.”

Beowulf approached them, quietly, but like a shadow that carried weight. "So you want to make a deal with a fever," he said. "You want to say to a disease, 'Eat the left arm, leave us the rest.' You have understood nothing."

“Then what, sir?” someone asked, and this time the question was not defiant, but simply blunt.

He could have given his grand speech now. About duty, about glory, about final battles and all that nonsense bards love. Instead, he spoke the truth:

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “I’ve seen more monsters than all of you put together. I’ve seen men die who were better than me, simply because they opened the wrong door at the wrong time. I only know one thing: if we wait for him to choose us, we’ll always be the ones chasing after him.”

Wulfgar approached, smelling of smoke and horse. "We need time," he said. "Time to bring more people in. Time to redistribute supplies. Time to see if the bastard stays in his hole or if he wants to go for another spin."

“Time is exactly what he is stealing from us,” replied the Grey Man, but his voice was more of a statement than a contradiction.

In the evening, when the hall grew quieter and the day hung behind everyone like a heavy sack, Beowulf had the bards sing. Not because he felt like singing. Because the silence would otherwise have been too loud.

They sang of olden times, of victories, of Grendel and the lake. Stories in which Beowulf was younger, tougher, faster. The men listened, some with a gleam in their eyes, some with the quiet knowledge that the old man up front was no longer the one who crashed through doors in the songs.

Beowulf listened to himself as he appeared in the verses: as a hero, as unshakeable, as one who always wins. It felt as if they were singing about a different man.

"That's how the next lie begins," he thought. "We believe that whoever conquered the lake back then will automatically conquer the mountain. But my bones know better."

Later, as the singers grew quieter and the mead seeped deeper into people's minds, he withdrew. Not to bed. To the ramparts.

The night was no longer completely dark. In the northeast, a distant, dull red glow still flickered, like the remains of a fire refusing to die out completely. The smoke hung lower, and the stars above seemed offended at no longer being the only lights.

Beowulf stood there, his hands on the wood that creaked beneath him. His fingers were covered in fine ash cracks, as if they had tried to hold onto the scorched fields and had been burned along with them.

"All right," he said, gesturing towards the hill. "You've had your test. You've shown what you can do with a single breath. Good. Now it's our turn."

The wind didn't answer. But somewhere deep below, there was another vibration. A faint, ominous reminder that something had been there that had heard him.

“I will come,” murmured Beowulf. “Not today. Not tomorrow. But soon. Not with an army you see as a meal. With a few men who know what it means when things are on fire. And with my old bones, who want to know one last time if they’re good for anything more than sitting.”

He was aware of how pathetic it sounded. Luckily, no one was listening to him, except the wind and perhaps a few pigs sniffing in the dirt.

He thought of the fields. Of how in spring they had still smelled of life, of manure, of sweat, of rain. And of how now they smelled of the end, which knew no gradual autumn, but only a short, hot cut.

When the fields turned to ash, he thought, something inside me burned along with them. Not the desire to fight—that had never been strong, it just kept coming back when necessary. It was more that part of him that had still hoped for something like peace. A few years with beer, stories, without blood in the water.

"Forget it," he said to himself under his breath. "Men like you don't get any quiet years. We get coaching sessions for the next disaster."

Down in the courtyard, someone coughed. A bowl clinked somewhere. A dog barked briefly, then fell silent, as if realizing its sound was too faint to be heard that night.

Beowulf lingered on the rampart for a long time. He no longer counted the dead in his mind. He only counted possibilities. Every one looked awful. But at least a few of them had some poise.

The fields had turned to ash. The empire was still there. So was he. That was the balance sheet. For one day, that was enough. Tomorrow it wouldn't be enough.

But tomorrow had not yet arrived. Today, an old king stood in the smoke of his own future and knew that he had to face it.

The days after the fire had no real beginning and no end. It was as if someone had ripped the hands off a clock, leaving only a gray expanse. In the morning it looked like evening, in the evening it smelled like midday, and in between, bodies, beams, and memories were moved around like rubble.

The courtyard was full of people who should have been somewhere else. Farmers who weren't sure if they were farmers anymore. Women standing around with a bundle of children and a bag full of nothing, as if someone were about to tell them what to do with all that stuff. Old people who refused to sit down because sitting felt too much like giving up.

Beowulf let them in. Where else would they go? The farmyard had never been built to be a refugee camp. Suddenly, it was one. In the corners where weapons and barrels had once stood, there were now sleeping places made of straw and blankets that no longer smelled of home, but of strangers.

For the first few days, he navigated the chaos like a doctor walking through a burning barn without tools. He listened. Not to everyone, not to everything. But enough to get a picture. It was always the same picture: flames moving too fast; a wind changing direction like a whim; a shadow in the air that no one had really seen, but everyone felt, as if a piece of the sky had suddenly vanished.

“We saw the ground burning,” said a woman with a sooty face. “Not just the grass. The ground itself. As if the earth were glowing from within.”

“I was in the stream,” said a man who looked as if he’d been half-cooked. “The water was cold at first. Then suddenly warm. Not like summer. Like a pot. I got out before it cooked me.”

An old peasant woman, someone who had previously contradicted him, stood before him with a burned cat in her arms, as if that were all she had left. "You told us to leave," she murmured. "We stayed. Now we have ashes."

Beowulf couldn't even blame her. Standing still is humanity's favorite pastime. They built houses, planted trees, buried their dead, and acted as if that were a guarantee.

“I said it because I was afraid,” he replied. “Not because I knew what was coming. That knowledge only comes afterward.”

She didn't glare at him. She no longer had the energy for hatred. Just that dull hole in her eyes, where something like defiance had once burned.

Hrothmar kept to the background. His hands were now bound, the skin beneath them raw, raw flesh under rough cloth. He did what he could: hauling, carrying water, keeping quiet. No one knew exactly what he had to do with the cup, except for a handful of men. But something spongy, made of guilt and superstition, clung to him, as if the stares of others weighed heavier on his shoulders than burdens.

Beowulf summoned him one evening. Not in the hall, not in front of everyone. Behind the house, where the air smelled a little less of guilt.

"Can you still grab it?" he asked.

Hrothmar raised his hands. The bandages were yellow and gray; what was visible on his fingers looked like meat that had hung over a fire for too long. "It hurts," he said. "Yes, indeed."

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "Pain is memory. You will need it."

Hrothmar dared to glance over. "You're sending me back there again."

“I won’t send you anywhere I won’t eventually go myself,” said Beowulf. “But you’ve been there. You know the way. You know what it feels like when your belly breathes from the mountain. That’s more than most of us here can offer, apart from fear and big talk.”

“I never wanted to…”

"I know what you wanted," the king interrupted. "You wanted history. You wanted gold. You wanted to be different from all the other shadows under the hall's ceiling. Congratulations: you've done it. Now you'll get the second part, the one no one thinks about when they want the first."

"And who would that be?"

“Responsibility,” said Beowulf. “You don’t leave as a hero. You leave as one of those who have to clean up after they’ve messed up.”

Hrothmar nodded. It wasn't a heroic nod. More like one that says: "I don't have anything left to hold onto anyway."

As the screams in the courtyard subsided, leaving only a miserable hum in the background, Beowulf had gathered Eadgils, Wulfgar, and a few of the older dogs around the rough card table. They had rolled, weighted, and smeared the parchment so many times that it resembled the skin of an old man.

“We can’t be everywhere at once,” Eadgils began. “The people coming here now need shelter, food, some kind of future that doesn’t taste of ashes. At the same time…”

“…we have a burning goddamn hill out there with an angry beast inside,” Wulfgar finished. “If we pull everything inwards, we’ll leave him with the fields, the forests, the farms as fuel.”

“We have no walls to stop him,” said one of the princes, who for once managed to utter a sentence that didn’t include “my country.” “He flies. Or jumps. Or crawls. Or whatever. It’s not like an army that you can just shatter against a wall.”

“He is still a body,” Beowulf replied. “And bodies can be hurt. The question is not whether. The question is: at what cost.”

For a moment, all that could be heard was the crackling of the fires in the bowls.

"If you go," said the Grey Man, "you'll have to leave the kingdom behind. Not entirely. But enough so that what remains can function without you. You're old enough to know that kings can't just disappear without leaving a hole for others to fill with shit."

“I know,” said Beowulf. “That’s why we’re sitting here talking, instead of me having been in the saddle for ages and feeling like I used to.”

They started writing things down. Not grand pronouncements. Names. The names of those who would be capable of running the shop while he was away. Men who wouldn't immediately gamble everything away if they had the key to the treasury for three days. Women who already maintained more order than they were given credit for, and who, in an emergency, could also give orders, even when the men were still debating whether they could bear the word "order" coming from a woman's throat.

“If I fall,” Beowulf finally said into the room, without pathos, “no one will go out to avenge my death. I don’t want a second bunch of idiots who think they have to chase after the next flame just because it says ‘honor’ somewhere.”

“If you fall,” Wulfgar replied, “everyone will do what they want anyway. We’ve never known it to be any different. But I promise you, I’ll beat up the first one who utters the word ‘revenge’.”

They laughed briefly. A dry, harsh laugh. Laughter these days was like stale bread: hard, difficult to chew, but better than nothing.

Later, when the group dispersed and everyone fled with their thoughts to different corners of the room, Beowulf remained with the blacksmith. A broad-shouldered fellow with arms like beams and eyes as weary as the ropes at the harbor.

"How long has it been since you fitted me with armor?" Beowulf asked.

“Too long,” the blacksmith said honestly. “You’ve become wider. And softer. In some places. In others harder.”

"I noticed it," murmured Beowulf. "When I tie my belt, the old armor squeaks at the mere thought of movement."

"If you really want to go," the blacksmith said slowly, "I have to see her. The old woman. And you without her."

Beowulf grimaced briefly. Not out of vanity—he'd had enough of that. It was simply the thought of having to peel himself out of the king's costume one last time to see what lay beneath.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Today I would just cough in the ash dust and pretend that’s why my buckles are popping.”

The blacksmith nodded and left.

Beowulf slept poorly that night, but that was nothing new. The difference lay in the content. They were no longer just dreams of fire. This time he saw the fields as they had once been:

green, yellow, brown. Men standing in them, backs bent, women laughing, children playing in the mud, too young to understand what work was. Then a line of fire cut through this scene, as if someone had struck a red-hot sword across the entire year.

The dragon was there, yes. But in the dream, it wasn't the focus. It was somewhere in the background, a huge shadow slowly stretching. In the foreground were the faces. The ones that were still there.

He woke up with a pain that had nothing to do with his bones and everything to do with his head.

The next morning he was in the yard early, before the real hustle and bustle began. The smoke had lessened, but it still hung in the beams like a drunken relative who won't leave.

Hrothmar was hauling buckets. The bandages were fresh, but the fire had settled in his hands like a keepsake. When he saw Beowulf, he stopped, unsure whether to greet him or hide.

"Lift your head," said Beowulf. "You're not the only one who messed up. Others just sang the wrong songs, while you crawled into the wrong hill."

"I've ruined everything," Hrothmar said hoarsely.

“No,” Beowulf replied. “You were merely the spark that fell into a pile of dry straw that we all had stacked together over years. You took the final step. But the path there was full of our mistakes.”

Hrothmar didn't know whether that should comfort him or not.

As the day wore on, Beowulf had a few things gathered. The old armor, dusted and oiled, yet still covered in tiny rust pits, like the skin of an old warrior. The swords that had names. Not the shiny, barely used ones for holidays, but the steel that had truly bitten.

He looked at her as if he were seeing old friends again, with whom he had parted ways after a falling out.

"You wanted peace and quiet," he muttered. "So did I. Guess that didn't work out."

News of the conflagration had divided the empire like a festering wound. One part huddled together, seeking shelter, seeking orders. The other part was already beginning to wonder if they might as well live farther away. Some spoke of emigration, of new lands, of ships bound for somewhere.

"They'll always have something to run away from," said Wulfgar, upon hearing this talk. "If not dragons, then neighbors, hunger, or boredom."

“Let them,” said Beowulf. “Those who can only run away are of no help where they need to be.”

In the evening, as the sun tried to somehow maintain the illusion of still being the primary light through the smoke, Beowulf stood once more on the rampart. The outline of the wildfire lay like a scar across the landscape. It was no longer visible as it burned, but it was still there.

"It started with a thief," he thought. "With a cup. With a humming hill. Now we have fields that look like a bad dream. What's next? The halls? The cities? Or just me, standing there in the embers, trying to pretend I still have something to say?"

He felt the weariness in his bones. And something worse: the clarity. There was no elegant way out of this. No trick, no magic, no clever workaround. In the end, it would all come down to flesh versus steel again. His flesh.

"All right," he said quietly, to no one and to everything. "If the fields are ash, the only thing left to do is see if you can stand on ash and still hit the ball."

Down in the courtyard, metal clanged. The blacksmith had opened his workshop and laid out the armor. Men moved back and forth, voices growing louder, then fainter again. Daily life went on. The only difference was that it now had burnt edges.

Beowulf turned away from the wall. The decision was not a loud moment, not a sworn promise echoing across the courtyard. It was a weary turning of an old man who knew he would have to climb metal once more, instead of the earth.

The fields had turned to ash. Now it was his turn.

The future smelled of soot and iron. And somewhere within it, of old sweat in armor that had heard too many stories.

CHAPTER 24 – The old king laces up his armor

The morning he decided to squeeze himself back into the iron cage, his body felt like a house that had been rained into by too many winters. The beams were still holding, but they creaked with every gust of wind, and no one would have bet that the roof would survive the next storm.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his feet on the cold floor, listening to his knees grumble. They sounded like two old men in the corner of a tavern: always on the verge of getting up, but never truly ready. Outside in the yard, the usual sounds – coughing, drawn-out curses, a rooster who didn't know the world smelled of burning and yet acted as if every day were the same.

The suit of armor lay on a stool opposite. Not on a stand, not neatly draped, but like a tired dog that had simply flopped down somewhere. Iron that had been bent too often. Leather that had sweated too much. A heap of metal that claimed to be more than just weight.

Beowulf stared at her as if she were staring back. In a way, they did, those old things. Every scratch was a memory, every stain a story that bards never quite got right.

The blacksmith came in without knocking. He had the right to do so. Whoever gives you a second skin always has the right to act as if they were family.

"You look worse than the iron," he said by way of greeting.

"Iron was always prettier," Beowulf grumbled, wiping his face with the flat of his hand. "And it doesn't have to pee."

The blacksmith snorted, put down the leather strap he had brought, and walked around the stool like a doctor around a patient he had seen too often. He picked up individual parts, checked the buckles, the rivets, the neck ring.

"The armor can still be saved," he said. "I'm not so sure about you."

"Start with what you know," said Beowulf. "Whoever wants to take care of me later."

He stood up. Slowly, without trying to look heroic. Heroes don't jump. Heroes learn at some point that bones have their own timetable.

He pulled off his undergarment, the fabric clinging briefly to his skin, which was dry and chafed from the smoke of the past few days. Beneath it lay a body that bore little resemblance to the one the bards had sung of. The flesh had thickened in places unrelated to strength, thinned in the wrong ones. Scars crisscrossed his chest, stomach, and back like maps of past mistakes. Some were fine and clean, others coarse, ugly lumps, as if a bored, drunken god had been wielding a knife.

"Turn around," grumbled the blacksmith. "I want to see if there's still enough room for iron on you."

Beowulf did it. The air in the room was cold, creeping up his back. For a moment, he felt as naked as he used to be, as a young whippersnapper, when his shirt had been ripped off to see how many blows he could take. Now it wasn't about blows anymore. Now it was about how much weight his back could bear before it collapsed under its own weight.

"You've lived too well," muttered the blacksmith. "Too much mead, too much meat. Too rarely have you slept hungry in the forest."

“I have gone hungry for others too often,” Beowulf replied. “Eventually, you start finishing the plate when it’s put in front of you. Because you know what it’s like when there’s nothing but air on it.”

The blacksmith put the chainmail on him. Previously, this had been a seamless moment, iron flowing like water over his shoulders and chest. Today, it caught twice: once on a scar under his right shoulder blade, and once on a hip bone that protruded more than it looked good.

"Raise your arms," growled the blacksmith.

Beowulf lifted it. There was a cracking sound.

"Not so high, you still want to be able to reach it when you want to count the cattle's teeth," the blacksmith commented dryly.

They both laughed briefly. Humor was the little bit of oil that kept the joints of fear supple.

The chainmail fit. Tighter than before. Like a truth ignored for too long. The rings scraped against his skin, cold, heavy. Beowulf breathed in and out. His chest protested, but he grew accustomed to the pressure. He'd grown accustomed to worse.

Then came the chest plate. Not the ornate one he'd worn as king at festivals, with engraved patterns and stories no one needed. This was the other one—the dull one, the one that had already buckled when he'd spent the night beating Grendel out of him.

The blacksmith held her up as if showing a tired horse the saddle. "My old friend," he said. "I hope you two are still on good terms."

"He is the only one who has never stabbed me in the back," murmured Beowulf.

Putting it on was a minor drama. The plate had actually been made for a younger man. It had aged along with him, but not in the same way. "Exhale," the blacksmith grumbled, pulling the straps as if trying to hold together a barrel with loose hoops.

Beowulf exhaled as far as he could, felt the pressure close in. A brief moment of resistance, then he yielded.

"If you fall over, I'll know I tightened the buckle one too many," said the blacksmith.

"If I fall over, the dragon will have less work to do," Beowulf replied.

They carried on. Shoulder guards, arm guards, the old leather straps that had to be greased every year so they wouldn't simply snap when things got serious. The blacksmith worked with focused concentration, speaking little. He had an expression on his face that Beowulf only saw on people who knew that what they did was more than just a craft.

"I never thought I'd get you looking like this again," he said quietly at some point.

“Neither do I,” Beowulf replied. “But life is bad at throwing things away. It keeps everything for the wrong moment.”

When they were finished, he stood there, encased in iron, as if an old tree had been covered with metal plates. The weight pulled at him, but it was familiar. A strange familiarity—like a handle you grasp again after years, and which immediately tells you who you used to be.

He took a few steps. Slowly at first, then faster. The creaking of the straps, the soft clinking of the rings, the dull thud of his heavy boots on the ground. He felt his body, under the weight, remember a role he had long since shed.

"You walk like someone who needs to remind himself that he's not twenty anymore," commented the blacksmith.

“I walk like one who hopes his bones have forgotten how old they are,” said Beowulf.

Outside the door, muffled voices could be heard. Men pretending to be there by chance. Young men, curious. Old men, wanting to see something they themselves would never wear again.

Beowulf knew they were there. At the same time, he didn't want to see their faces when he went outside and they saw the old dog jumping back into his harness.

"Let them see," said the blacksmith. "They'll talk one way or another. At least you can give them a reasonable picture instead of them making one up."

He was right. Men talk anyway. If they can't do it with their eyes, they'll do it with their mouths.

Beowulf stepped to the door, paused briefly, took another deep breath – as deep as his chest plate allowed – and pushed it open.

The farmyard was the same as always, and yet different. Pigs, buckets, children running around between legs, women trying to hold things together while the men played at the end of the world. But there were more lingering glances than usual. Eyes fixed on the edges of the burned fields, on the makeshift sleeping places, on the faces of those who had lost everything.

And now on him.

The conversation didn't stop completely. It just faded. The voice that had just been laughing loudly was halved. A few words caught in the throat.

Beowulf descended the steps, each step sounding heavy but sure. He didn't walk like a young hero. He walked like a man who knew the way and knew that nothing good awaited him on the other side.

"Looks like he's still got something," someone muttered in the back.

"Or as if he were trying to surprise death with metal," said another.

Wulfgar approached him, his helmet under his arm, his hair still full of ash. He looked him up and down, slowly, as if checking whether enough of the bastard he had known for decades remained.

"Well, Grandpa," he finally said, "does the can still fit, or do we have to smear you with grease so you can get out again?"

"If you outlive me, you may open the lid," replied Beowulf. "Until then, you'd better hold on to the buckles."

They laughed, this time not just the two of them. A few of the men nearby grinned cautiously, as if they were afraid the laughter might awaken the dragon.

Hrothmar stood at the edge of the courtyard, his bound hands in front of his stomach, his gaze fixed on the ground. When Beowulf turned in his direction, he started to turn away, but then stopped.

"You too," said Beowulf, nodding at him.

"Me?" Hrothmar looked around as if there must be someone else he meant.

"You were in it," said Beowulf. "You are our only creeping plan. You don't go up front with the sword, but you go along. You show us where the belly is thinnest."

A few of the other men muttered. "Him?", "The guilty one?", "You want to take him with you?"

Beowulf glanced briefly in their direction. "You're welcome to offer your heads," he said dryly. "But none of you had your breath on your face. He did. So now he'll eat the rest."

Hrothmar swallowed, nodded curtly. It wasn't a resounding "yes." More like, "There's no such thing as a 'no' anymore anyway."

Eadgils stepped closer, gripping the stick more firmly than usual. “The old dog is back in the irons,” he said. “We’d better make sure the rest of the yard doesn’t look like a flock of headless chickens while he’s gone.”

"That's why I have you," Beowulf murmured. "Someone has to be there to hold things together when I decide to rust away somewhere in a belly of rock and gold."

A few of the women came closer, not too close, but close enough to see the armor cling to his body. One of them, a widow whose husband had died in some petty war fighting for another prince, looked at him for a long time.

"And who will protect us if you don't come back?" she asked.

He met her gaze. She had the right to an answer. More than many others.

“Then you finally need to protect each other,” he said. “Over the years, I’ve conditioned too many of you to believe that whenever there’s a fire, some asshole will show up with a sword. Maybe it’s time you realized that you are more than just people living under one roof.”

It wasn't a comforting answer. But it was honest.

The blacksmith arrived with the helmet. It was old, the edges slightly dented, but still smooth inside. A piece of metal that could make the difference between "history" and "stain".

"Don't put it on yet," he said. "As long as you have to talk, it's better if they can see your face."

Beowulf picked it up anyway. It felt heavier than before. Perhaps because he knew what it meant this time.

"The old king is lacing up his armor," he thought bitterly. "And everyone's acting like that's good news."

He looked around the yard. The clotheslines, now heavy with wet rags that had once been houses. The children playing in the dirt, having forgotten that it had belonged to someone just yesterday. The men trying not to look afraid.

“I’m not leaving to save you,” he said, without raising his voice. “I’m leaving because I’m the one who can most easily pay with his past. I’ve got more dirt on my hands than you all put together. Maybe it’ll settle a bill I didn’t even know I still had.”

No one disagreed. They knew that was only half the truth. The other half was: He left for her anyway.

He turned the helmet over in his hands. The metal caught the grey light that seeped through the smoke.

“If I put this thing on,” he thought, “I’ll no longer be the one sitting in this hall listening to people. I’ll be the one kicking down doors again. Only this time the door will lead into a mountain.”

He put the helmet aside. Not yet. He still needed to see. He still needed to speak. The moment would come soon enough when he would have nothing but steel between himself and the world.

The old king stood in the courtyard, in armor that had seen too much, and felt his body beneath the iron remembering a role he no longer wanted to play.

He knew that this was not a performance, but a final rehearsal.

The stage would be a hill that was burning.

It's one thing to put on armor. It's another to wear it in front of people who, for years, have been used to seeing you in a crown, not in iron. A crown means you decide who dies. Armor means you go with them. The court needed a moment to process that.

After the initial shock had subsided and the gawking had died down, that typical aftershock began: the chatter. Not loud, not organized. Many little conversations, flitting across the yard like sparrows.

"He's serious." – "He's really going." – "With the armor? At his age?" – "Maybe he thinks he's going to die anyway, so at least not in bed."

Beowulf only heard fragments. He had been king too long to believe he could still ignore everything said behind his back. Words are like drafts: they always find a way in.

Eadgils limped across the yard, his cane lower than usual. "We need to sort this out," he said. "Before every other idiot thinks he has to put iron around his mouth just because you're doing it."

“I’ll only take those I need,” Beowulf replied. “Not those who volunteer because they’re fed up with their lives. Suicidal tendencies are not a criterion for bravery.”

Wulfgar arrived, his helmet now on, as if he couldn't bear to walk around without head protection while the sky behaved as if it were in a bad mood. "Who do you need?" he asked. "Say it loud so they know who you mean—and who you don't."

Beowulf looked across the courtyard. Faces. Too many, too few. Old dogs wanting to bite again. Young ones who had never bitten, but imagined their teeth were sharper than any story.

“I don’t need heroes,” he said. “We already have enough of those in the songs. I need people who stay silent when things get tough and don’t start spouting clever remarks when they’re out of breath.”

He began to list names. Names that felt like stones in his mouth. Wulfgar, of course. He was like a second shadow you couldn't shake, even when you were alone in the room. A few of the old warriors, their faces more wrinkled than their shields had dents—men who knew what it was like when a line broke and you didn't.

Then he named younger ones. Not the hottest minds, but those he'd observed over the past few years: those who didn't boast in training, but remained silent when they couldn't do something, and then persevered until they did. One who had voluntarily stayed outside with the cattle last winter when the storm hit, so they wouldn't freeze to death, while the others drank mead in the barn. One he'd once encountered at night carrying an old woman through the mud, unnoticed. You remember things like that.

“You, you, you,” he said, pointing. Each finger was like a judgment. The chosen ones reacted differently. Some straightened up, trying not to triumph. Others turned pale, as if they had hoped fate would find another destination.

Hrothmar was still standing at the edge, unsure whether his name belonged in this row or in another – the one where the dead were counted.

"Hrothmar too," Beowulf added aloud. "Without him we might find the entrance, but not what lies beyond. He has touched the thing. He knows how it sounds in the bones."

A murmur. Not loud, but clear. "The thief," someone whispered.

Beowulf turned his head. "Yes," he said. "The thief. The one who messed up the whole world. That's exactly why he's coming along. Whoever tampered with the chain gets to help hold it up now."

The man who was murmuring lowered his gaze.

"And the others?" asked a young warrior in the background, his chest filled with more pride than intelligence. "We're supposed to stay here and... what? Wait?"

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “Exactly. You stay. You hold the court, you keep bringing in people, you organize the food, the wall, you make sure this doesn’t become a pile of animals when I and the others are no longer here to tell you which hand to use to greet each other.”

"That's not a task for warriors," protested the boy.

“War isn’t just about a sword in your hand,” Beowulf retorted. “War is also about carving hide while something’s buzzing outside, and still not forgetting who you’re giving the fat to. If you think men are only worth something when they’re going up in flames, you haven’t understood anything.”

Wulfgar grinned beneath his helmet. "He means you shouldn't become completely stupid while we're gone," he translated.

A few of the men laughed uncertainly. The laughter caught in their throats, but it was better than nothing.

Later, in the hall, once the initial noise had subsided, the real work began: the planning. No pretty maps, no smooth lines. More like a battle plan for someone who knew that you can only impress uninvited guests to a limited extent.

On the rough table lay a new drawing of the area around the hill. Someone had taken pains to depict the burned areas, the landslides, the streams that were now brown and warm. The fire mountain stood as a dark blotch in the center. No dragon was drawn, just an ugly circle.

“We are not going as an army,” said Beowulf. “An army is just more meat for the fire. We are going in a small group. A core. The rest stays within range, but not so close that they get roasted along with the rest if things go wrong.”

Eadgils nodded, tapping the edges of the burned area with his stick. "We might still be able to go around here. The ash isn't so deep. You don't want to get stuck in the finest dust if you suddenly have to run faster than you can think."

“There’s an old path,” Hrothmar began haltingly. “Here, on the flank. Between two large rocks. That’s where I…” He paused, as if he had stepped on a thorn branch. “That’s where I went back then. Before I crawled inside.”

"You go in front," said Beowulf. "If you lie, you die first. If you tell the truth, perhaps second."

"Mister…"

"That's alright," Beowulf cut off his whimpering. "You're no hero. Stop pretending you have to be one. Just be someone who remembers and doesn't make the same mistake again. That's enough for today."

They talked about equipment. Not about gold, not about rings. About water, ropes, hooks. About shields that should serve more as movable walls than as proudly polished symbols. About torches – “but not too many, he has his own light,” Beowulf said – about wet cloths against the smoke, about everything one could use against a monster that was not made of flesh and sorrow, but of fire and possessiveness.

“We won’t hit him in the air,” Wulfgar said. “We’re too old, too heavy, too used to the ground. We have to tie him down somewhere where he can’t spin freely.”

“In his hole,” Beowulf murmured. “Where his treasure lies. Where he least wants to lose it. If we can get him there, we might have a glimmer of hope.”

“You seriously want to climb into a hole with an angry mountain,” said one of the older warriors, shaking his head. “You’ve always been bad at choosing comfortable battlefields.”

“Convenient is what pleases others,” Beowulf replied. “Dragons like wide open spaces. Air. Distance. If we take that away from them, they take our breath away. A good deal.”

Once the plan was roughly in place—a “plan” in the sense of: “We’ll go, we’ll try not to die immediately, we’ll take what we can”—the group dispersed. Everyone carried a piece of it into their mind, mixing it there with their own fears and their own fantasies.

Beowulf remained behind with Eadgils. The Grey Man sat down heavily, his walking stick leaning against the edge of the table.

“You should give a speech,” he said. “Not the big, lying one. The other one. The one where you tell them you probably won’t be coming back.”

“Why?” asked Beowulf. “They know. I know. Heaven knows. What more can be said?”

“Because words can bring order before everything falls apart,” Eadgils said. “The bards will sing their nonsense from it later. But they need a foundation. A few phrases to hold onto when they slaughter you in rhymes.”

Beowulf stared at his hands. They lay on the table, heavy, scarred, the joints swollen. Hands that had held on too often and had been allowed to let go too rarely.

“I am tired, Eadgils,” he said quietly. “Tired of talking. Of fighting. Of the responsibility of explaining to everyone why their suffering has meaning, even though I know that most of the time it doesn’t.”

“That’s precisely why,” the old man replied. “Don’t tell them fairy tales. Tell them exactly this. That it’s pointless. That you’re leaving anyway. Because someone has to go. That’s more honest than all the stories about the gods put together.”

Beowulf nodded slowly. He felt the weight of this task more than that of the armor. Fighting was easy. Speaking while everyone stared at you as if you could extinguish fires with words—that was the real test.

In the afternoon, he summoned the entire farmyard. Not everyone could fit into the hall. Some remained outside, leaning against posts, standing on walls, holding children in their arms, clutching buckets as if the wooden handles were anchors.

Beowulf didn't stand on the table. He remained at floor level. The iron on his body gleamed dully in the gray light that filtered in through the door. He looked at her. A kingdom in tatters.

"I'll keep it short," he said. "Because I don't want to bore you with pretty words while there's a beast awake out there that doesn't give a damn about our rhymes."

A few people grimaced. It wasn't the kind of speech they were used to.

“You know what happened,” he continued. “The hill burned. The fields are ashes. Some of you lost everything. Some of you only neighbors. Some were lucky and only scared. Congratulations. That’s the lottery of life.”

He saw the looks. Pain, anger, resignation, a thin veneer of hope that refused to die.

“I’ve seen more monsters than is healthy,” he said. “And I know one thing: if you wait long enough, they’ll come for you eventually. They’re more patient than we are. So I’m going to him. Not because I think I’m invulnerable. Not because I think the gods personally chose me as dragon fodder. I’m going because I can bear to leave my blood in the belly of a mound better than to watch you all burn one by one in the courtyard.”

Silence. No argument. Just that dull, collective inhalation.

“I promise you nothing,” he said. “No ‘I’ll be back.’ No ‘we’ll make it.’ Those are words for children and bards. I only promise this: When I go, I’ll go in front. Not behind you. And I’ll take as much fire with me as my old bones can carry.”

That was essentially the end of the speech. Nothing more was needed. Anything more would have been a lie.

He looked at their faces again. There was fear. But there was also something else: respect. Not for the armor. For the fact that he wasn't feeding them cheap lies.

The old king had laced up his armor – metal on the outside, weariness and stubbornness on the inside.

The dragon was waiting somewhere in the belly of the mountain.

It was only a question of who would take the first step that outweighed their own doubts.

After the speech, the courtyard didn't simply dissolve. It merely shifted. Like a pile of rubbish that someone kicks. The people didn't leave, they drifted. Small groups formed, dissolved again, pushed past each other like pieces of wood in a crowded river.

Beowulf stood still until the initial barrage of questions, stares, sobs, and stupid comments had subsided. He knew the drill. Every time he said something more important than "Pour more," the realm needed a moment to figure out what to make of it.

The widow from the other day—the one who had asked who would protect her if he didn't come back—approached him again. No cat this time, no tears. Just that wounded pride in her eyes, the kind people have who have lost too much to be polite anymore.

"So you're leaving," she said. No accusation, no plea. A statement of fact.

“Yes,” he replied.

"And you expect us to stay here and sweep the yard while you break your bones somewhere in the mountains?"

“I expect nothing anymore,” said Beowulf. “Expectations are for people who think the world has an order. I just hope you don’t all fall apart when I can no longer stick my head in everywhere.”

She snorted. "We lived before you," she said. "We will be something after you too. Maybe not what you imagine. But something."

"Good," he murmured. "That's more than I would say about some of the men here."

She turned around and left. He liked her. Precisely because she didn't freeze in awe. The world needs people who tell a king he's just a man in iron.

Hrothmar appeared beside him like a guilty conscience that had sprouted legs. The bandages were dirty, his eyes red from smoke or whatever else burned in his head at night.

“Sir,” he began, “if we… if we go in there… what is the plan for me?”

"You go first," said Beowulf. "You show us the way. You don't speak when you have nothing to say. You cry out when you realize the rock beneath you breathes differently than before. And you try not to die before I put my foot into the belly of the mound."

"And... what if I get scared inside?"

Beowulf looked at him for a long time. "You'll be terrified in there," he said. "Me too. Wulfgar as well. Even the gods would probably wet their pants if they saw what's really down there. Fear isn't the problem. The problem is when you run because of it when you should crawl. Or stay silent when you need to scream."

Hrothmar nodded, as if he had expected the answer to be in a book and then still hadn't found any pictures.

Wulfgar approached and gave him a friendly nudge on the shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "If you faint from fear, we'll trip over you and realize we're too close. It's a kind of service, too."

Hrothmar laughed briefly, surprised that he could still do it.

Later, in one of the smaller rooms, where grain was usually counted or clandestine trysts arranged, Beowulf sat with Wulfgar and Eadgils. The table was narrow, the room foul, the air thick. A perfect place for final plans.

“We’re leaving in two days,” said Beowulf. “Not before. I want the people who lost everything out there to at least know where they’re sleeping in the hall before I make a run for it.”

“Two days is a long time when a dragon outside learns how well we burn,” Wulfgar grumbled.

"If he comes in the next two days, he'll come one way or another," said the Grey Man. "Whether you have armor on your back or not. The world doesn't care about schedules."

Beowulf rubbed his temples. "I need these two days," he murmured. "Not for pathos. For cunning. For people who need to know who has something to say to them when I'm no longer roaring."

They went through names. Not just warriors. People who could organize the farm. Old women who were tougher than most men. A few of the younger ones who were good with numbers because they'd had to learn early on how many days the grain would last.

“If I die somewhere in a cave someday,” said Beowulf, “I at least want to have the image in my head that you are not standing here wondering who is washing the dishes.”

“You are the only king I know who, shortly before his possible death, is thinking about who will do the dishes,” Wulfgar remarked.

"The washing up determines whether a farm works," Beowulf replied. "If there aren't any clean dishes in the morning, the day is ruined before it's even begun. Anyone who's ever slept in a poorly run barn can tell you that."

They drank little. A little mead, more out of habit than pleasure. Beowulf had no intention of spending his last waking days drunk. It's easier to die drunk, but also more stupidly.

When evening came, Beowulf did not retire to his chamber. He sat down in the hall, not on a chair, but on the edge of a bench. The fire in the center burned smaller than usual, as if it knew that a larger flame was outside, against which it seemed like mere candlelight.

The bards kept quiet. For once. One of them eventually came, harp under his arm, and remained nearby, uncertain.

"Play something," grumbled Beowulf. "But not that old rubbish I'm in. I don't want to listen to myself becoming a disciple."

"Then what, sir?"

"Play something about people who don't make it into the songs," he said. "Those who haul wood while others play heroes. Those who lose their sweat in the dirt and not in the verse. Play something about the kitchen women who wash more blood from furs than we spill on battlefields."

The bard looked at him as if he had ordered him to fell a tree with his harp. Then he nodded slowly. He began to play. Not grand deeds. Small ones. A man who brought his family through a harsh winter without anyone saying a word. A woman who buried more children each year than she bore, and yet carried on. A boy who was never allowed to go into battle and instead spent his whole life in the stable so that others could ride horses into battle.

The hall listened. It was quieter than during the usual heroic chants. The notes hung heavy in the air, as if they didn't want to move on.

Beowulf felt something inside him calm down and at the same time tighten.

“This,” he thought, “is the dirt I’ve been trying to protect all along. Not crowns, not names, not those damned gold pieces. Just this quiet, tenacious everyday life that no one notices as long as it works.”

As the night crept on, he eventually got up, quietly, and shuffled past the benches that were full of half-asleep men, curled-up children, and women who curled up around their bundles like little living treasures.

He passed Hrothmar's makeshift camp once more. He was lying on his side, bandages covering his face, as if he didn't want to see the fire in his hands.

"If you lead us in, you won't crawl for yourself this time," thought Beowulf. "You'll crawl for these people. For this miserable bunch who will still get up the next morning and do something."

Out on the ramparts, the smoke had thinned. The sky to the northeast glowed faintly, like the embers of a campfire that refuses to go out completely, no matter how much ash you throw on it.

Beowulf leaned against the wood, feeling the crooked, tired rocking of the boards beneath his weight. He let his gaze wander over the land that had never truly belonged to him, but which he had treated for years as if it were his unruly child.

"Perhaps," he thought, "this is the moment when I finally stop raising this child. Perhaps this is the moment when I give it back to the world. With all its quirks."

The next day, the practical part of the farewell began. No grand ceremonies. Lists. Packing bags. Checking weapons. Someone cursed because their sword was dull; someone else laughed at them because they'd never learned how to take care of their own blade.

The blacksmith dragged over the last straps, pulled here, loosened there, and tapped on the metal like stubborn oxen.

“When you come back,” he said to Beowulf, “I want the armor either melted or barely scratched. Anything else shows me that you stopped halfway through.”

“I thought you wanted them back to hang them on the wall,” said Beowulf.

"I want it back so it doesn't rust away in some cursed dragon's cave where no one sees how much work went into it," growled the blacksmith.

Beowulf grinned. It was a tired grin, but one that was genuine.

They laid out supplies, more water than mead, more cloth than finery. Eadgils brought a small, tattered scroll on which he had scribbled something.

"What is it?" asked Beowulf.

"Words you should forget when you're in there," said the old man. "Explanations, reasons, god-related nonsense. In there, you only need one thing: direction. If you start thinking about meaning, it will devour you at the first thought."

Beowulf took the scroll, put it in a bag, knowing full well that he would probably never read it. The gesture was enough.

By the evening of the second day, everything was prepared, as far as one can prepare for something that, by definition, has no desire to be planned.

Beowulf stood in his armor, his helmet this time under his arm, no longer on the table. Around him was the small group he would take with him: Wulfgar, Hrothmar, the old warriors, and two or three boys with faces that, for the first time, showed something like genuine fear alongside pride.

The courtyard was full. Not with shouting. With stares.

The old king laced his armor tighter one last time, pulling on the straps the blacksmith handed him. He felt the pressure on his chest and shoulders, on his ribs, which had been broken far too often. It was as if someone from the outside were telling him: "Breathe while you still can."

He put on the helmet. The metal pushed itself in front of the world, leaving only a narrow slit for his eyes. The sounds became muffled, the courtyard seemed smaller, the sky farther away.

"Well then," he said, his voice hollow beneath the iron, "let's go and see if the fire mountain lives up to its promises."

He climbed into the saddle. His bones protested, the horse moved restlessly, as if it sensed that it was carrying more than just one man.

Behind him, the small group formed up. No parade. No pomp. Just men in irons, with weapons, cloths, ropes, and a thief with burned hands who looked as if he were still trying to wake up from a dream that had long since moved on.

The old king laced up his armor – and this time the knot was tied for good.

The dragon was waiting.

The empire held its breath.

CHAPTER 25 – Young Cowards, Old Anger

They rode off, and the empire watched them go as if they had taken a piece of its spine with them. No song, no fanfare, only the dull thud of hooves and the scraping of iron against leather. The courtyard shrank, the faces blurred into a gray border of fear and hope, and then there was only the road.

The first stretch was familiar. Fields that hadn't yet burned. Slopes where the grass still looked so green, as if that hill over there didn't exist. A few children ran behind for a while until they were pulled back by mothers whose hands were firmer than their voices.

"Look at them," Wulfgar muttered from under his helmet. "As if we were riding into a market, not towards the mouth."

“Let them look,” said Beowulf. “Perhaps they’ll remember what we look like if we don’t come back. Then at least they can claim later that we were sitting more or less upright.”

The boys – there weren't many, but at the moment they felt there were too many – rode a little further back. You could hear their clanging, their poorly suppressed nervousness. You can recognize boys by the sound: they clatter more than necessary. One, slim, with a beard that was more wishful thinking than actual hair, tried to sit casually in the saddle, his lance held sideways, as if he were heading to a tournament.

"That's Biorgil's boy," Wulfgar muttered. "He's never seen anything but training. Probably thinks things work like in the songs."

"The stench is never mentioned in the songs," said Beowulf. "Nor how heavy the iron becomes when you realize you're not just wearing it for show."

The farther they came, the thinner the air became. Not because of the altitude. Because the smoke hung in the distance like a threat in the sky. It wasn't as thick as on the day of the fire, but it lingered like an aftertaste the world couldn't shake.

They passed the first burnt fields. The boys' voices grew quieter. The ground beneath their hooves changed the sound—away from the dull thumping of grass to that dry crunch as hooves crushed ash and charred stubble. Each step kicked up clouds of gray dust that clung to boots, horses' bellies, and armor.

The first person he came across, who had just been raving about fame, lifted his coat to his face. "It stinks," he muttered.

"Get used to it," said Wulfgar. "If you're unlucky, that'll be the last thing you smell."

They passed a farmyard that the fire had left half-destroyed. One side was gone – charred beams, a collapsed roof truss, a stove standing like an exposed heart in the ruins. The other half: blackened, charred railings, a few planks still standing, a cart whose wheels were bare metal because the wood had given way.

On the threshold of this half-world sat an old man. Too old to run away, too tough to fall. He saw them coming, the suits of armor, the horses, the metal, and spat into the ashes.

"Only now," he called out, without getting up. "Only now, when everything already looks like a barbecue."

Beowulf reined in his horse and stopped. Dust settled around the group like a shroud.

“We were here yesterday,” he said. “You weren’t there.”

“I was down in the stream trying to save my skin,” grumbled the old man. “Now I’m back and I still have less of a roof than before. And you’re riding to where that came from?”

"Yes."

The old man squinted. His eyes were red with smoke, but not yet blind. "Then make it worthwhile," he said. "We're all going to die here eventually anyway. But I'm fed up with always just being used as firewood in your stories."

Beowulf nodded. Not as a promise. More as an acknowledgment. Then he rode on.

The boys behind him had overheard the conversation. You could see it in their shoulders, which sank a little lower. This wasn't an audience. This was a man who didn't have enough life left to endure their display of bravery.

As they ventured deeper into the burnt land, the sky became strangely flat. The light had that color it takes when too much smoke hangs between the sun and the ground. Not a true gray, not a yellow. Something in between, which made everything equally tedious.

Hrothmar was now riding in the front third of the field, his gaze fixed straight ahead, as if trying to burn the path clear with his eyes. He knew it well, that much was obvious. His shoulders tensed in certain places even before the ground changed, as if his memories had created their own map.

“Right there,” he said suddenly, pointing with his bandaged hand, its movements tentative. “That’s where the slope begins, leading up to my stomach. And beyond that are the rocks, between which I…” He broke off.

"That's fine," said Beowulf. "The rest is in your head. It's enough if you unpack it later."

They stopped at a small, partially untouched depression. A few trees were still standing, their leaves brown at the tips, but the trunks were alive. The ground was less burned, more mottled.

"Rest," said Beowulf. "No fires. We've seen enough."

The men dismounted. The movement had a sense of relief – not just for the horses. Wearing armor while in the saddle is one thing. Wearing armor while bending over to pee or fetch water is quite another.

The younger ones initially pretended to smile away their tiredness. One immediately began tightening the strap of his sword, as if that would change anything. Another searched for the best stone to casually sit on.

Then the body took over. Knee pain, aching shoulders, the burning sensation in your back – when you realize for the first time in your life that armor doesn't just exist in pictures.

Beowulf sat down on a fallen log. The iron creaked, the log squeaked in protest. He took off his helmet. It was as if someone had lifted a bucket from his head. Air rushed in, sounds became sharper again, the world regained its shape.

Wulfgar plopped down beside him and groaned softly. "I'd forgotten what that felt like," he said. "Like someone strapping a chariot to your back."

"He was lighter back then," Beowulf remarked.

“We were lighter,” Wulfgar corrected.

The boys gathered around a small hollow, whispering amongst themselves. One of them, the one with the beard, tried to yawn discreetly and forgot that his helmet was in the way, but he rammed the edge of it into his nose. A short curse, a few sidelong glances.

Beowulf looked at them for a while. Then he nodded to one of the older dogs. "Go on over there," he said quietly. "Listen to what they have to say. And come back before I get a toothache from being so stupid."

The man – Brond, grey beard, eyes like two screws – shuffled over as if he were just looking for water. He stayed within earshot, pretending to fiddle with his straps.

When he returned, his face was even more wrinkled.

"Well?" asked Beowulf.

“They’re encouraging each other,” Brond said. “Saying things like, ‘If we can do this, we’ll be in the songs forever.’ One of them said that you’re probably half-dead by now because you’re so old, and that he’s determined to make his mark at the right moment so that people will know his name.”

"And?"

"And two of them looked at each other as if they had just realized that they would rather be at home. One said 'I'm scared.' Quietly. The other pretended he hadn't heard it."

Beowulf nodded. "Those are the ones I might be able to use," he murmured.

"Those who are scared?"

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “He who has no fear is either too stupid to die or already half dead. With fear you learn to put your foot where it won’t immediately sink away.”

He rose again, leaning slightly on Wulfgar as he pushed himself up. His bones creaked, the armor pulled at him as if trying to hold him down.

He walked over to the boys. The conversations stopped, as if someone had briefly pulled the mead from the barrel.

“Well,” he said, “how are you enjoying the trip so far? Better than in the song, right?”

The man with the beard cleared his throat. "We are ready, sir," he said. "We will not run away."

Beowulf looked at him like a dog barking to announce his presence. "You know what always pissed me off the most?" he asked. "When boys promise me things their bones have never even tried. You don't even know what you're running away from. How will you know if you'll stay?"

The boy blushed beneath the dirt. "I... I just mean, we want to fight."

“Wanting is cheap,” said Beowulf. “Needing is expensive. Right up ahead, when we’re closer to the belly, the ground changes. It hums. The air thickens. Your heart leaps into your throat. Voices start in your head saying, ‘Turn around. Now. Say you have a bad foot, say your sword is blunt, say your mother will die if you go.’ And then you’ll see who you are. Not now. Not in your damn saddle with your clean armor.”

One of the younger ones, smaller, with bright eyes, cautiously raised his hand, as if this were a lesson. "And what if I realize I want to run away after all?"

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "Then you run," he said. "But not when there's a fire. If you already know you'd rather be lying at home in the straw, then turn around. I don't need any backs to lay my sword on if I think there's a dragon there."

The boys looked at each other. Not one of them moved. Of course not. Pride is a bad rope, but at least it holds until the first flame.

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "Then get ready. The part where you can still consider whether you are brave is almost over."

He left her standing there and went back to his tribe. Hrothmar stared in the direction of the hill, as if he could see it through the curves of the landscape.

“You crawled alone back then,” said Beowulf. “Were you trembling?”

Hrothmar nodded. "I thought I was being brave the whole time," he whispered. "And then I realized I was just too far in to turn back."

“Exactly,” said Beowulf. “Courage is often only what remains when the way back is too narrow.”

The rest was short. They drank, they ate dry bread that turned to dust in their mouths, as if trying to blend in with its surroundings. Then they continued on their way.

The slope in front of them grew steeper, the ground harder. The ash lay deeper, in places like snow. Their hooves sank in, the horses snorted gruffly. In the distance, barely audible, was this deep rumble. Not a roar. A hum, a vibration, as if someone had welded a gigantic cauldron to the underside of the world.

The boys grew quieter again. One of them began to pray softly. Not to any particular god. Just into the air.

Beowulf felt the old anger rising within him. Not against the dragon. It was what it was. A beast, a thing, a burning mound with a claim to ownership.

His anger was directed more at the boys he felt breathing down his neck: their quiet boasts, their flimsy promises, their unconscious belief that in the end someone like him would always avert the worst. It was directed at the princes who let him ride off without understanding that the realm would breathe differently without him. It was directed at the gods, the stories, the whole accursed machine of fame and blood.

"Young cowards," he growled to himself. "Old anger. Let's see who has more weight in the end."

The hill was getting closer.

The exam too.

The closer they got to the hill, the quieter the chatter became, and the louder everything else inside them grew: their heartbeat, their breathing, the soft clang of metal as a hand trembled,

not quite gripping the strap. The wind had changed direction, now blowing against them from the mountain, warm, dry, with a taste of rust and scrap metal on their tongues.

“That’s where it starts,” Hrothmar murmured, and you could hear his voice waver slightly on the last word. The slope rose before them, not a beautiful mountain, not a summit to point to, more like a huge hump in the landscape, as if the earth had hidden a foreign object beneath it. In some places, the rock was bare, dark, and cracked. Between these cracks lay strips of scorched earth like burn scars.

"Doesn't look like much," said one of the boys. The bearded boy, of course. "I thought he'd be... taller."

"Wait until you're inside," Wulfgar growled. "It's like some men: unassuming on the outside, but inside full of shit you never thought could fit into one body."

The humming was no longer imaginary. It hung in the air like a deep note, unspoken. The ground vibrated imperceptibly but steadily, as if somewhere a heart beat that never stopped. The horses grew nervous, pinning their ears back, tugging at the reins, panting as if they had suddenly become more assertive than usual.

“We’ll walk the rest of the way,” said Beowulf. “The animals aren’t built for what lies ahead.”

They dismounted. The first thing the boys noticed: iron becomes twice as heavy when the ground is uphill. And three times as heavy when the ground vibrates beneath you. One of them stumbled on his very first step, barely managed to catch himself by grabbing his horse's bridle and almost got a hoof in the face.

Wulfgar handed his horse over to one of the older companions, who would stay behind. "Turn around if you feel it getting too hot," he told the animal, as if it understood. "I don't want you ending up as the main course in some song."

Beowulf briefly stroked his horse's flank. A gesture he hadn't made a habit of, but needed now. A reminder that there were still living beings out there who were innocent.

"Tie them up in that hollow over there," he ordered. "With water. If we come back, we might need them. If we don't come back, at least they shouldn't be grilled up here."

The men did as they were told. The horses were led away, reluctantly, some almost dragging their leader behind them, as if to demonstrate who had the better nerves.

“From here on, you crawl,” said Beowulf. “Not literally—not yet. But in your minds. Every step is a ‘I will go on despite everything.’ If anyone thinks they must prove their honor now: back into the hollow, helmet off, sit down. I don’t want any heroic poses getting in my way when the mountain coughs.”

He looked around the room. The faces were a mixture of sweat, soot, and those moist eyes that men get just before they claim the smoke is to blame.

"If someone realizes now that they would rather live than die: no problem," said Beowulf. "But say so. Say, 'I cannot.' I have more respect for an honest coward than for one who turns to stone at the wrong moment."

Silence.

Then a voice spoke up. Small, but clear. The one with the alert eyes from his rest, the one who had dared to ask what would happen if he wanted to run away.

“Sir,” he said, “I… I don’t know what I am. Brave or cowardly. But if I turn back now, I’ll never find out which I was. I’ll spend my whole life brooding before bed wondering if I could have stayed.”

"What is your name?" asked Beowulf.

“Wigstan,” he replied.

Beowulf nodded. "Good, Wigstan. Then come along and find out. But if you find your brain telling you 'Run' and your feet are still stuck, don't try to be a hero. Go."

Wigstan swallowed, but his eyes did not look away.

Another boy, broader, with inflated self-confidence, snorted. "I'm not going back," he said too loudly. "I swore..."

"Shut your mouth," Wulfgar cut him off. "The mountain doesn't care about your oaths. It will eat you with or without them."

They set off. Not a pleasant march. A slow, arduous climb over ground that kicked up dust with every step and was sometimes deceptively soft beneath the surface, as if something were smoldering there, just waiting for air.

Hrothmar now walked a little ahead, his gait lower than the others, sometimes almost hunched over, as if he were traveling alone again. His shoulders twitched slightly when the ground vibrated more intensely.

“Here,” he said, “is the edge. Beyond it lie the rocks, between which…” He paused again.

"That's alright," murmured Beowulf. "The mountain knows we're coming anyway."

The slope curved. Beyond it lay a kind of natural terrace: a flat area, half rock, half compacted scree. From here you could see the upper part of the hill, and closer by, the first large boulders, which looked as if someone had ripped them out of their stomach and left them there.

"They're continuing on foot?" one whispered.

"What did you think?" asked Wulfgar. "That we would drive right up to the front door and ring the doorbell?"

Beowulf raised his hand. "Halt," he said. "Here we will rest once more. The last place where you can turn back without me despising you."

The men stopped. Some clutched their spears as if they were about to slip. Others stared at the ground as if there were instructions written there somewhere.

The humming was much louder up here. It crept up my legs, into my knees, into my hips, settling in my chest like a second heart beating out of rhythm.

One of the boys – not Wigstan, the other one, the tall one – swallowed audibly. You could see his Adam's apple almost touching the inside of his helmet.

“Sir,” he said suddenly, “I… I feel sick.”

“Everyone feels sick,” Beowulf replied. “Welcome to the club.”

“No, I mean…” The boy searched for words. “I feel like the ground… it’s pulling away from under me.”

"Pretend you're drunk," said Wulfgar. "You know how to do that."

A few people laughed strainedly. The boy who wasn't the target of the joke, but who was nonetheless the butt of it, wiped his mouth with his hand.

Beowulf pushed his helmet up a little to let the air reach his face. He looked at them—the young, the old. He felt anger rising within him, mixed with something like pity. A shitty cocktail.

"Listen," he said. "I'm going to say this once, and anyone who doesn't get it can regret it on the way: I don't expect any of you to be immortal in there. I only expect you not to be the first to run when you see my back. You want fame, gold, songs? Forget it. This isn't some beautiful death in verse. This is smoke in your throat and screams where no one knows which part belongs to whom."

He gestured towards the hill. “That thing up there knows no honor. It knows only possession. All the determination we throw at it is for us. Not for it.”

The broad-chested boy, who had been so loud before, now lowered his gaze. You could see his hands working on the lance, his fingers slipping from the handle because the sweat made them slick.

"What is your name?" asked Beowulf.

“Herebald,” he murmured.

“Herebald,” Beowulf repeated. “If you’re going to turn around, do it now. Not when it’s glowing. I don’t want you in history as the one who suddenly figured out at the wrong moment that his home was more important than my back.”

Herebald's mouth opened, closed, opened again. One could see the inner forces pulling: the voice that told him he had to stay in order not to be a coward, and the other that screamed in his ear that his bones were not made for flames.

Then something happened that Beowulf had seen a thousand times before: The boy glanced briefly at the others, saw their looks – half scrutinizing, half just as frightened as his own – and caved.

“I… I can,” he stammered. “I’ll stay. I…”

"At least lie well if you're going to lie," Beowulf growled. "Back down. You don't go all the way back. You stay with the horses. You won't tell anyone you were at the front. You make sure our animals are still standing when we get back. Or that they don't die if we don't. That's your war."

The relief on Herebald's face was so palpable it almost hurt. At the same time, there was shame, like a second skin. He nodded, too quickly, too often, turned around, and trudged a little way down the slope, holding the spear now less like a weapon and more like a walking stick.

"One gone," Wulfgar murmured. "How many more?"

“As many as it takes to ensure that those who must stay remain,” said Beowulf.

Two more boys volunteered after a brief internal struggle. One claimed his ankle was twisted. Beowulf looked at him, saw that it was a lie – but also that his knees would give way anyway.

"Back," he said. "Before your 'foot' pulls us all down the mountain."

In the end, the core group had shrunk. Wulfgar, a few of the old warriors, Wigstan, who was pale but standing, Hrothmar, trembling, but with a strange, fixed gaze that looked more like self-loathing than courage.

"Young cowards," thought Beowulf, as he watched the retreating group shrink in size. "But at least they're honest. Better now than later."

At the same time, he felt the resentment in his bones.

He remembered himself, young, drunk, foolish, standing in unfamiliar halls, promising everything he didn't know. He remembered nights when he had no choice, because someone in a crown had said, "You're leaving." And he left.

"Maybe it's a good thing they're softer than we are," he thought. "Maybe that means they'll live longer later on. If there even is a later on."

"You're angry," Wulfgar stated quietly, as they resumed their ascent.

“Of course I’m angry,” said Beowulf. “I’m old, I stink, I’ve got iron on my ribs that was built for younger men, and I’m going up there while half the lads are running away in fear down below and then later call it ‘wisdom.’ Of course I’m angry.”

"On them?"

Beowulf considered. "To everything," he said then. "To those who leave. To those who stay. To me, because I'm doing it again. To the gods, if they exist. To the dragon, because he exists. To the cursed cup under our courtyard. Take your pick."

The slope remained unmoved by the old man's anger. It simply grew steeper. In places, the ground was sheer slag, black, glassy, slippery, as if a river of fire had once flowed here and then simply stopped.

"Just a little further," Hrothmar panted. "Up ahead... there are the rocks, between which..."

“I know,” said Beowulf. “Between whom you first went too far.”

They reached the first row of rocks. Gigantic boulders, crooked, piled on top of each other as if someone had thrown them and then left them there. Between two of them was a gap. Not large. A jagged slit. Dark.

Heat emanated from the opening. Not like a fire burning openly. More like the breath of a sick animal. Heavy, damp, with a hint of metal and stale, burnt air.

The humming was no longer a humming sound. It was the direct roar of a gigantic lung. In. Out. In. Out.

The boys – what was left of them – looked pale. Wigstan swallowed, Hrothmar gasped, one of the older warriors muttered something that sounded like a half-finished prayer.

Beowulf stood before the gap, his helmet half pushed up again so that he could feel the air directly on his skin.

“In there,” he thought, “is the end of everything I was. Either because I am lying in it – or because afterwards I will no longer be anything I knew before.”

The old anger inside him boiled over. Against the mountain. Against the fire. Against the world that had arranged things so that in the end, old men always had to crawl into caves to do things that others were too soft to do.

"Young cowards," he muttered. "Old anger. Fine. Now we'll see who lasts longer."

He put the helmet on tightly until the metal pressed against his forehead.

"From here on," he said, "there's no turning back. Whoever leaves now, leaves completely. Whoever stays, stays until the end. No matter what that looks like."

Wigstan nodded. Wulfgar grinned, a sharp, hard grin. Hrothmar closed his eyes briefly, as if to curse himself, then opened them again.

The hill breathed.

Beowulf too. For now.

The crevice smelled of everything one wants to avoid in life: damp stone, old blood, cold smoke, and something that tasted like burnt metal, even though you only inhaled it. It was as if the breath of all bad decisions had collected there.

Hrothmar stood at the entrance like someone hesitating before his own confession. His bandaged hands trembled. Not much, but enough to be seen if you looked closely. Wigstan looked. His eyes wide, his lips dry.

"I came in here," whispered Hrothmar. "Back then."

“Yes,” said Beowulf. “And here you go again. With us. How kind of you to show us the shortest path to disaster.”

Wulfgar stepped beside him and gazed into the darkness. "How deep?" he asked.

“Deep enough,” Hrothmar replied. “It slopes down at first, then widens. You’ll notice it. By the light. And by…” He searched for the word. “By the feeling that you’re walking into something that doesn’t want you there.”

Beowulf turned back to the men. There weren't many left. And that was a good thing. Too many legs in narrow holes only create chaos.

“Last chance,” he said. “There’s no shame here if someone says, ‘I can’t.’ The shame only begins if you freeze at the wrong second.”

No one moved. Of course not. They had already climbed too far to see any way back. Men rarely turn back once they've started telling themselves stories about their courage.

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "Then we crawl."

Hrothmar went first. Not out of courage, but because he had to. His bandaged hands felt their way along the rock, searching for ledges, for crevices, for the safe path between sharp stone and crumbling edge. The gap was just wide enough for a man in armor to squeeze in sideways. Not a majestic entrance. More like the slit in the mouth of an animal clenching its teeth.

Beowulf followed second. Not out of politeness. Out of calculation. If something went wrong ahead, he wanted to be close enough to hear it, and far enough away to be able to react. Wulfgar came behind him, close enough that Beowulf could hear his breathing like that of a dog waiting behind a door. Behind them came the others, a small procession of metallic shadows creeping into the belly of the mountain.

The rock was cold beneath my hands, but the air was warm. A strange juxtaposition, like stepping into a kitchen in winter where the stove had been burning for days. The humming was louder in here. It no longer came from all directions, but from the front, from below. A deep, never-ending tone that echoed the stone in my bones.

Wigstan tripped and stumbled, catching himself with his hand and scraping his fingertips raw. He cursed softly. It hurt his dignity more than his skin.

"Everything alright back there?" Wulfgar called out in a subdued voice.

“Yes,” Wigstan lied reflexively, then bit his tongue. “Well… it’s okay. I only fall if you bump into me from the front.”

A few of the old warriors snorted. Humor in tight spaces is a luxury, but sometimes the only one.

They went deeper. Step by step, their armor scraped against the rock, sparks flew when iron rubbed too hard against stone. The air grew heavier, more humid. Once, something dripped onto their helmets. Water, Wigstan thought. Hopefully water. It didn't smell like it. More like blood that had had time to age.

The gap eventually opened into a sloping passage. Hrothmar paused briefly to make way for Beowulf. "From here on, I could taste the air," he whispered. "It... it's thicker. As if it's already been used before you even get it into your lungs."

Beowulf stepped past him. He felt it. Breath that wasn't his. A current lapping against him. In. Out. In. Out.

"The bastard knows we're here," Wulfgar muttered. "At the very latest now."

"He knew it the first time Hrothmar dipped his little fingers into his dung heap," growled Beowulf. "This is just the part where he's deciding which hole he'll spit us out of."

They continued on. The passage was wider, but not so wide that one could stretch out. Enough room to move, to fight—but only if one knew what one was doing. In here, they couldn't afford any leisurely strolls. Everything was close. Stone, air, sounds, thoughts.

There were discolorations in the walls. Darker streaks, as if fire had licked them. In one spot, Wigstan saw what looked like molten metal that had trickled down the wall and then solidified. In the shape of a face. Not a real one. But enough to fuel his imagination.

"Don't look," murmured one of the old men behind him. "The mountain loves it when you give it pictures."

After a while – time had no weight in here anyway – a faint glow appeared. Not the clear light of a torch. A reddish, flickering light, far ahead, deep below. It was as if someone were carrying a bowl of glowing coals beneath them.

The humming became his pulse. Beowulf felt it in his armor, in his teeth, in the back of his head. It was like the ringing that lingers in your ears after a fight, only this one never stopped.

“Here,” gasped Hrothmar, “I saw him. Not all of him. Only… parts of him.”

"Then stay behind me from here on," said Beowulf. "You've had enough of the front row."

They stopped. The corridor then took a bend, and there was more light beyond.

Beowulf turned to the men. He could barely see their faces beneath their helmets, but he knew their posture. The tension in their shoulders, hands, and knees. The way one of them unconsciously ran his thumb over the hilt of his sword, as if praying it wouldn't fail him.

"You'll be in his living room around the next bend," Beowulf said softly. "This was the hallway. If any of you realize now that you only wanted to be invited as far as the door—say so. There's no glory in dying in a hole that no one ever sees again."

It was an offer. An honest one.

No one moved. Wigstan bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood. Hrothmar stared at his own shoes, as if searching for the answer there. The old warriors didn't even look away. They had that look men get when they know this is their last walk, and they're tired of going back.

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "Then we'll finally stop thinking about cowardice. From now on, we have other worries."

They went around the bend.

The cave beyond was large. Larger than the hill would have suggested from the outside. The space had no clear shape. It was more like a hole, stretching in all directions without regard for geometry. The ceiling disappeared somewhere into the darkness, the walls blurred into smoke and shadows.

And in the middle: gold.

Not that beautiful, sorted, neatly layered gold of fairy tales and merchants' dreams. More like a heap of randomly arranged metal. Coins, rings, chains, weapons, bowls, helmets, pieces of armor, jewelry long since lost its purpose. All thrown together, mixed together, trickled together in fragments.

It glowed. Not from candles or torches. From the light of the things that lay beneath. Among the treasures were dark stains, bone fragments, charred remnants of something. The gold wasn't pure. It was tainted with what it had cost.

And above it – partly inside, partly around it – lay the dragon.

Beowulf had seen a lot. Grendel, the lump of flesh with arms. The mother in the lake, slimy and furious. Men with too much steel and too little brains. But this was a different breed.

It wasn't just the size. Yes, it was large. Not so large that it filled the entire room, but large enough that the men felt like children among tree trunks. The body was curled up, scales like blackened metal, cracked here and there as if it had grown too fast and the skin hadn't been able to keep up. There was a glow between the plates, as if someone had placed coal in a forge there.

Its head rested on a pile of gold, its eyes half-closed. Each scale seemed to breathe individually. Its claws lay casually on a belt of coins. Its tail was wrapped around another pile, as if it were a safety rope.

Breathing was no longer a sound, but a state of being. The air moved with every inhale and exhale of the cattle. Warm, dry, always with that hint of metal and something burnt.

"Holy shit," Wigstan whispered.

“If you say holy, bite your tongue,” Wulfgar muttered. “This thing is anything but holy.”

Beowulf stood there, looking at him. His first impulse wasn't anger, not even fear. It was something like exhaustion. A feeling of: "Of course. Of course you're so great. Of course you lie on more gold than an empire sees in a hundred years. Of course I have to be standing here."

A part of him, the small, bitter observer, thought: "The gold under my hall is laughable compared to this. No wonder men go crazy when they hear about it."

The dragon moved. Not a great rearing up. Just a slight twitch of its nostrils. A little more opening of its eyes. It was as if a mountain were briefly raising its head to make sure the ants had indeed come closer.

The eye that slashed open was not a loose animal eye. It was like a piece of molten amber with a crack. There was no hatred in it. No moral judgment. Only this cool, alien registration.

"He knows you've taken something," Beowulf murmured, without taking his eyes off the cattle.

Hrothmar swallowed. "He... he didn't even see me..."

“Just as you see gold when you don’t have it,” said Beowulf, “he sees every piece that isn’t there. He doesn’t care about your face. He cares about the hole in the heap.”

The proximity made everything worse. Wigstan felt his knees go weak. It wasn't the armor, not the heat. It was the knowledge: here is something that can turn you to ash in a single breath. Not slowly, not with a fight, not with glory. Just gone.

A brief moment – a very brief one – in which his brain screamed: “Run.”

He glanced to the side. The wall wasn't far. The passage behind them was open. He could…

Wulfgar touched him with his elbow. Not roughly. Just a quick nudge.

"Now," he whispered, "is the moment when you find out who you are."

Wigstan closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. The impulse to run was still there, but he stood still. Not out of heroism. Out of a mixture of shock, defiance, and the dull realization that with that image in his mind, he would never sleep peacefully again if he ran away now.

"Good," thought Beowulf, without looking. "One who will stay."

The others? One of the old warriors involuntarily took a step back. Not a big one. Just half a step. Just enough for his shield to strike the rock behind him. The soft clang echoed in the cave like a scream.

The dragon's eye has widened.

The humming changed. What had been a steady on and off became something sharp. Like a deep growl before a dog bites.

"That's it for being quiet," Wulfgar muttered.

Beowulf felt his old anger rising. Now he had a target. Not an abstract hill. Not a vague destiny. A body. Scales. Eyes. Breath.

He took a step forward. The heat was more intense. Sweat ran down his back, pooling under his chainmail, making the armor more slippery, but not lighter.

"Listen, you hoarding fire," he said softly, knowing the beast didn't need to understand him in words. "You've been lying here longer than my stories have gone back. You've seen more gold than my whole cursed life. You're full and still greedy. I'm tired and still angry. One of us is out of luck today."

The dragon raised its head slightly, its mouth a little open, a breath of heat escaping that made the air between them shimmer. No fire. Not yet. Only the promise of it.

Behind Beowulf, someone made a noise somewhere between a gasp and a curse. Young bones, old fears.

He didn't turn his head. But he knew: if someone ran now, the line would break before it had even begun to stand.

“Whoever runs away now,” he said, still looking at the dragon, “runs forever. Not just from the cave, but from themselves. The door behind you remains open. Use it if you must. But if you stay, you stay until the end. There are no half men in here.”

Nobody moved.

The dragon took a deep breath. A sound like a landslide inside a bucket.

Beowulf felt his heart pound in his chest. Old anger, old weariness, old guilt. Everything mingled together. He thought of the burned fields, the children by the stream, the woman with the dead cat, Hrothmar's burned hands, the buried cup beneath his hall.

“This,” he thought, “is not just my fight. But I’m the idiot who has to start it.”

He raised the sword. It felt heavier than before. But it was there. His hand remembered the hilt, his fingers found their places, as if they had never stopped remembering where steel ended and skin began.

Young cowards, old anger.

The boys stood. Not all of them would stay if the fire came. But now, in this moment, they stood.

The dragon opened its mouth a little wider. A thin, rough wisp of smoke billowed out, hot, acrid, full of everything it had burned in its life.

Beowulf inhaled. Deeply.

"Come on," he said, more to himself than to the creature before him. "Then let's dance."

The mountain roared.

And everything that had been before – fields, flames, ashes, speeches, armor – became what it had always been: prelude.

CHAPTER 26 – Beowulf and the Last One Who Remains

The beast's bellow was a sound no human could ever imitate, no matter how much mead they poured down their throat. It was as if a mountain were collapsing in on itself, groaning in protest. The sound didn't just pass through the ears; it raced through bones, teeth, and spinal cords. The rocks trembled, the gold vibrated as if applauding, and the ground beneath their boots twitched like an animal being cut into.

The first burst of flame didn't come as a majestic torrent, as in the songs. It came like a vomiting belch, an unrestrained pour of fire and smoke that swept across the room, at chest level, seeking out anything soft. It struck the first Old One—Brand, the gray dog who had seen more battles than the dragon Scales—almost head-on. No slow-motion moment, no heroic "I'll throw myself in between." He stood for a moment, then there was only a form engulfed in flames, which staggered two steps and collapsed in on itself, as if someone had pulled out the bones.

The stench of burnt meat mingled with metal, stale smoke, and the sweat of fear. Wigstan gagged, somehow holding it down with teeth and sheer willpower. Wulfgar roared something that was perhaps a command, or perhaps just a curse.

Beowulf stood at the front, shield raised high, sword half-raised. The blast of fire grazed him, at the edge, like a drunken knife-wielding assailant might only catch your cloak. The heat still struck him like a raw fist. The painted front of the shield began to smoke, small flames licked at the edges, the iron fittings suddenly becoming warm embraces.

"Down!" he roared, but the sound was almost lost in the echo of the dragon's roar. Nevertheless, they heard him. Those who weren't too far gone mentally ducked down, shrinking behind shields and stones, as if they wanted to become smaller, less interesting.

The dragon inhaled again, as if tasting her fear. Her chest rose and fell. The belly of the world churned. Gold slid, clinked, and rolled with each movement of a claw.

"Aside," growled Beowulf. "Not towards the mouth. We're not damned torches."

He made a move to the left, as far as one could call it a move when wearing irons and his knees had already protested before the climb. Wulfgar stayed close, as always. Two old dogs who knew how to weave between the legs of a larger animal without getting trampled.

The others tried to imitate them. With emphasis on "tried." One of the younger ones, who had been holding his own so far, slipped when his boots stepped on a pile of coins that behaved like balls beneath him. He slid, the shield slid sideways, causing him to stumble—just as the dragon jerked its head to the other side and took another breath.

The next burst of fire swept across the room, flat like a low wave. It didn't quite hit the boy, but grazed him enough to make his armor glow like a cursed furnace. The boy screamed, a high-pitched, unpleasant sound unlike anything found in songs. Men scream differently when they realize they're not dying, but being slowly roasted.

"Roll around, you idiot!" roared Wulfgar. "On the ground, in the gold, go!"

The boy obeyed, more out of panic than understanding. He threw himself into the pile of metal, writhing and rolling. Coins and rings clung to him, imprinting themselves on the heated layers of leather beneath. The smoke from singed fur and fabric, mixed with the metallic dust of the treasure, filled his lungs. But he was alive. For now.

Much further back, at the edge where the darkness was denser, it happened. The first real crack. Not in the rock. In the rows.

One of the men—not exactly young, but not one of the old guard either—took two steps backward. Then another. His gaze fixed on the dragon, his body already half turned toward the exit, though his mind still pretended to be there. His hand on the shield hilt turned white with tension, sweat dripping from his jaw.

Wigstan saw it out of the corner of his eye. He wanted to shout something, a name, a curse. But inside, it was too loud. His heart was pounding, his brain was full of fire and images of what that thing in the middle had done to Brand.

The man took another step back. Then he turned around. Completely. No grand gesture. No "Forgive me!" or "I'll be back!" Just the naked, raw movement of flesh that wants to survive. He ran. Not thoughtfully, not tactically. He ran as if the exit awaited him with open arms.

One of the others hesitated, saw him first, then the dragon, then Beowulf. Then he ran after him. Then another one.

The clattering sound of armor, thrown into a panic, echoed through the cavern. It sounded sharper than the clinking of gold. Sharper than the hiss of fire.

Beowulf heard it. Of course he heard it. He had stood in more caves than a healthy biography can bear. He knew the sound of retreats that no one had ordered.

The dragon raised its head even higher, as if it too had realized that something was changing its palate. Prey that shrinks itself.

"Wait!" one of the old warriors shouted after the fleeing men. "You fools, you..."

Another burst of fire came, diagonally backward, toward the exit. No accident. With a languid, monstrous elegance, the beast twisted its neck, sending a broad, stuttering stream of flames along where the lumps of armor moved.

The first one, who had run, almost disappeared in the fire. No body remained, only shadows in flames. The second one stumbled, was half-hit, fell to his knees, arms outstretched, while his shoulders began to glow. The third one roared, threw himself sideways, slid between rocks and gold, his helmet smashed against stone, and lay still.

Wigstan stared. Somewhere inside him, something laughed hysterically. "There is your path, coward. There is your exit."

Beowulf growled, teeth clenched, shield half raised, half sideways. He felt the ancient anger welling up inside him, but not in the direction one would expect. Not just against the beast. Against those who fled. And against himself, because he knew what it felt like to stand in a cave and realize that his legs wanted something other than honor.

"Let them run," Wulfgar shouted. "Anyone who leaves now will only get in your way later."

“I won’t let them,” growled Beowulf. “The mountain won’t let them.”

The dragon drew in another breath. In, out, its belly like a forge craving more. The gold slipped beneath its weight, coins leaped as if making their own little escape attempts.

"Sideways!" barked Beowulf again. "On the flank! The scales on his belly... where he rests!"

They moved. As best they could. Step by step, their boots sinking amidst the clutter, things that had once paid for lives rolling beneath their soles. A dagger handle snapped under a kick, an old helmet received its final dent.

Wigstan clung to Wulfgar's side. He slipped once, caught his foot, and felt the edge of a sword beneath his foot. For a second, he considered picking it up, his own seeming so familiar yet ridiculously small compared to the beast. Then he understood that metal was just metal. What mattered was whether the hand would still be holding when everything was on fire.

Behind them—or was it beside them? This hole distorted directions—he heard footsteps receding. Another. Another. Sometimes a stumble, a curse, a scream, when someone realized too late that the fire wasn't just consuming the front row.

“They’re leaving,” thought Wigstan. “They’re leaving him here. The old man. The one they’ve told their whole lives was invincible. And now he’s just a man in iron between a mountain of gold and a mouth of fire.”

He waited for Beowulf to roar. For him to curse them back, to curse their souls, their families, their names.

The old man did none of that. He just continued roaring towards the dragon, issuing terse commands, moving around, holding the shield at the angle that would allow him to take another breath.

"They'll leave anyway," he thought. "Everything else is a fairy tale. In the end, there are always only a handful of idiots left who are too old, too proud, or too stubborn to run anymore."

The dragon shifted its front claws as if trying to lie down more comfortably. In reality, it was simply adjusting its position to get a better view of them all. Its head tilted, its neck arched, its mouth opened wider. Deep inside, there was something like molten embers.

"He likes himself," thought Beowulf bitterly. "He's done this many times before. Heaps of flesh, heaps of gold. Always the same crap."

Hrothmar stood to the left, closer to the rock, his back to the wall, his bandaged hands gripping the shield handle as if he would otherwise be blown away. He was trembling all over. Everything in his head screamed: "Get away. Get out of here. Not again. You looked too far into that maw once, that's enough."

And yet he stood still. Perhaps out of guilt. Perhaps because somewhere inside him sat a lingering, rotten form of pride that said: "If you run now, you'll just be a footnote in a story you started."

Another burst of fire. This time not a broad carpet, but a focused beam. It struck the rock beside them, ricocheted, traveled along the wall, scorched the edges of shields, and made metal scream. The heat was so brutal that Wigstan thought his eyes would dry out.

A sign wouldn't stay put. It went dark in the middle, then light, then transparent, then it was gone, as if it had never existed. The man behind it screamed; there was no time to turn around and see how much of him was left.

"Closer," growled Beowulf. "We need to get closer. We're burning up slowly back here."

And then it happened. The moment that wrote the chapter, the one no one is ever prepared for.

Another man, who had been holding on, suddenly ripped his helmet off. Not because he'd gone crazy. Because he couldn't breathe. He gasped for the thick stuff they were breathing, his eyes wide with panic.

He saw the exit. Saw the bend in the corridor. No more than a shadow. But enough.

"I can't go on," he croaked. "Lord, I... I can't..."

Beowulf turned halfway toward him. "Then go," he said. Not a trace of contempt in his voice. Just that tired, flat tone. "But hurry. The mountain doesn't like slow cowards."

The man stumbled forward. Without a helmet, his sword still in his hand, his shield lost somewhere in the gold.

Wigstan watched him go. And inside him, something clicked. It wasn't a heroic moment. Not a "now or never" moment. More like a quiet, "Okay. They're running. I'm not."

He didn't know why. Perhaps because he couldn't imagine sitting back in the hall afterward and pretending it had never happened. Perhaps because he saw Beowulf standing there in front, broad, heavy, old, and thought to himself: "If he falls and I've caught him from behind, I might as well just bury my face in the ashes and leave it there."

The dragon took another breath. The embers between its scales grew brighter.

Wigstan felt his knees wobble. But his feet stayed put. It had nothing to do with courage. More like a remnant of decency that refused to rot away.

Young cowards ran. Old anger stood firm. And somewhere in between, someone realized he'd rather burn up beside anger than grow old behind cowardice.

The mountain breathed in.

They exhaled.

Then the fire started again.

The fire came like a response to everything they had done wrong in life. No beautiful arc, no perfect line – it was a swirling torrent of embers and greedy light, seeking the path the dragon showed it with a flick of its head.

Beowulf raised the shield high, its edge like a final, upright curse against the sky. The flame struck, not head-on, but hard enough to make the wood cry out. It cracked, creaked, the paint swelled, burst. The iron rim went in an instant from cold to "keep your hands off if you want to keep them."

The jolt threw him back. His knees buckled briefly, the armor pulled at his shoulders as if trying to drag him down into the sea of gold. He regained his balance, his feet sliding over coins that behaved as if they were bullets.

Wulfgar was there, instantly, as always. A step sideways, his shield at an angle, teeth bared. Part of the fire passed by him, the edge of the shield caught flames, he cursed, hurled the burning board to the side, where it landed on a pile of old helmets, which immediately began to smoke.

"He likes us," he gasped. "He really likes us."

“We’re the only idiots left standing here,” Beowulf growled. “Of course he likes us. We’re the all-you-can-eat buffet.”

Behind them, the scene had completely changed. It was a mixture of smoke, movement, screams, and silence. Some of the men hadn't yet grasped that they had just died. They stood there, half-hit, half-encased in fire, their bodies trying to catch up with what their minds still held. One looked at his own burning hands, as if they had betrayed him.

The dragon unfurled a talon, its body shifted, the gold sliding like a stream of hard water. Its tail swung to the side, not quickly, not wildly—more like the casual flick of a bored giant. It struck one of the remaining warriors in the hip. The crack was heard through metal; the bones beneath were silent. The man flew a short distance, crashed into a rock, and hung there like a torn coat.

"We have to hurt him," snapped Wulfgar. "Otherwise he'll burn us one by one until he gets bored."

“Belly,” said Beowulf. “Where he lies on the dung heap. The scales are thinner. And the neck, where he has to turn around.”

“Great,” muttered Wigstan, who was somewhere between fear and nausea. “So exactly the parts that are furthest forward.”

“Welcome to the profession,” said Wulfgar.

The dragon took another breath. You could see the ribs arching beneath the scales, the glowing heat between the plates, as if its interior were its own private forge.

"Now," Beowulf growled, and moved. Not away. Forward.

His boots sank into the gold, coins bounced, rings clinked, something sharp scraped along his armor, his knees protested, his back screamed. No matter. The old rage drowned it all out. He charged in a half-crouched attack, his shield like a battered maw before his chest, his sword at a right angle, ready to cut sideways, not from above, not gracefully, but deep.

Wulfgar was right next to him, as always. Two shadows in iron, moving through the shimmering glow of excess metal, in whose light they looked more like beggars.

Wigstan watched them go and felt a rift inside him. Part of him wanted to go after them. Part of him wanted to go back. Instead of deciding, he just yelled and ran the few steps that brought him closer to them. His legs had decided before his head could.

The dragon sensed the movement. Of course. A thing that had lain in a hole for centuries, hearing every wingbeat of the fly inside its belly, wouldn't miss a single man in iron trampling on its gold.

He didn't draw fire first. He drew the claw.

The right forepaw swung downwards in an arc, as large as a cart, its claws crooked and dark, their tips glistening with what would later be revealed as the blood of others. It didn't go directly for Beowulf. That would have said too much about him. It slashed into the ground in front of him, tearing up gold, bones, and stones, hurling the muck at them like a wave of hard scrap metal.

Beowulf raised his shield, feeling the impact of metal, edges, something slamming against his helmet. Stars, briefly. No romantic sky, just flickering points behind his forehead.

Wulfgar got half a pile of coins thrown at his face, felt a tooth loosen, and spat out blood and gold. "He's flaunting his wealth," he snorted. "That fits."

"Right, damn it!" gasped Beowulf. "Around the foot!"

The dragon's foot lay there like a bridge pier. The scales on the upper part were thick, dark, and smooth. At the transition to the belly, they became smaller, softer, and lighter, with crevices in between where dust and gold dust clung.

Beowulf was suddenly close. Too close. He could really smell him now. Not just fire. Not just metal. There was the stench of old meat, of hundreds of meals that had never been properly digested. Something that smelled of old caves and wet animal.

He wound up. Not a heroic record-breaking blow. A short, hard-hit strike, low, at an angle, precisely where his belly met his claw.

The sword encountered scales, slid at first as if over stone, then gripped, found a gap, and bored in. Not deep. But enough.

Something spurted. Not pretty blood. A thick, dark broth, thicker than water, hotter than anything you'd willingly put on your face. It hit the sword, the edge of the shield, Beowulf's arm. The armor hissed. Smoke rose.

"Acid," gasped Wulfgar. "Great."

Beowulf roared, not in pain—that came later—but in anger. “You’re bleeding,” he growled at the beast. “So you’re no god. Just a great bastard.”

The dragon whirled around. Its head, with eyes like glowing amber, shot closer. The teeth in its mouth were not beautiful fangs. They were irregular, dark lumps, some worn, some sharp. They smelled of everything they had pulverized.

He snapped.

Beowulf jerked aside. Not fast enough to avoid being hit. The teeth didn't snap shut, but the skull rammed him like a battering ram. The force struck him on his left side, shield and body at once.

Something cracked. Not in the shield. Inside him. Ribs. Two, three. A sharp flash of pain shot through his chest, as if someone had shoved a hot blade between bone and lung. The air escaped him like from a burst hose.

His flight wasn't graceful. No dramatic arc. More like a harsh, angular rip-away. He crashed backward into a mound of gold, rolled, felt metal biting into his armor, a helmet rim digging into his neck, a spearhead scraping somewhere along his thigh.

He lay there for a moment. Not because he wanted to. Because everything inside him briefly pressed pause.

Ribs. Yes. Damaged. Breathing? Difficult. On the left, it stung like someone was pushing a needle in with every breath.

"Stay lying down," something inside him said. "Just for a moment. Just for whoever owns this blanket."

"Get up," said the other part. The one that didn't want to die while the dragon still hadn't had enough.

Wulfgar was above him, suddenly in view. His face sooty, his helmet crooked, his eyes bright and wild.

"Everything there?" he yelled.

"More than necessary," croaked Beowulf. "Ribs are overrated."

Wigstan stood three paces away, his shield half-raised, his sword in his hand, his fingers gripping it so tightly they turned white. He looked back and forth – dragon, Beowulf, exit, dragon again – like someone trying to find the right door in a tavern where they all lead nowhere.

The dragon had certainly registered the blow to its belly. A deep, offended growl rippled through its body, through the ground, through the piles of gold. Its claw shot up, grasping at the injured spot, as an animal would when it couldn't comprehend that it was vulnerable.

The touch activated something. The blood—or whatever that viscous stuff was—smeared against its own scales, hissing and steaming. The dragon snarled something that sounded like a huge, angry cough.

"You're hurting him," gasped Wulfgar. "This is new for him."

"Good," Beowulf gasped, trying to push himself up. His entire left side of his chest screamed. His head throbbed. "He might die of fright."

He stumbled to his knees, half-rose, searching for the sword, which lay embedded in the gold a little further away like a foreign relic. Wigstan jumped forward and supported him with his free hand.

"Stay lying down, sir," the boy stammered. "You're... you're hit."

"Nonsense," Beowulf snarled. "I get hit every morning when I get up. This is just a different weight."

He ripped the sword from the metal; the rustling of the coins was a kind of cursed applause.

Behind them they heard footsteps. Not towards them. Away. Another one who'd had enough. One of those middle-aged men who'd spent their whole lives telling themselves they'd die in glory and now realized that glory feels different when it smells of burnt flesh.

“He’s walking,” Wigstan panted.

"Leave him alone," Beowulf said hoarsely. "He was never here. Only we are here."

It was true. The cave suddenly felt much emptier. Not because the space had become larger, but because bodies were missing—some as piles, others as movement.

In the end, there were only a few left. Wulfgar, panting beside him. Two old warriors, one with a burnt beard, one with a look that had already passed on. Wigstan. Hrothmar, clinging to the wall, pale, drenched in sweat, but still there.

"That's it," thought Beowulf. "It's always like that. In the end, only a handful remain. Not the best. Not the bravest. Just those too stubborn to run away."

The dragon shifted its tail position. With a jerk, a wave of gold slid backward, half-burying an old chest, rolling over a dead body that had already become decoration. The eye fixed on it again. It was larger now. Still alien, still without morality. But deep down, there was a small spark that hadn't been there before: pain.

"He's bleeding," Wigstan said quietly. "He's really bleeding."

"So he's mortal," Wulfgar murmured. "The bad thing about mortal things is that they're usually an indication that you are one too."

The dragon inhaled deeply, for a longer time. Its mouth opened wider. Wigstan saw the inside of its throat for the first time. It looked like a tunnel to another world, one made only of garbage and embers.

“If he now…” Wulfgar began.

Beowulf didn't think it through. He moved. Not elegantly, not quickly. But in the right direction. He jerked himself forward, away from the wall of gold in which he had almost become stuck, raising the shield, not for protection—the thing was half-burned—but as something to draw attention.

He roared. A short, harsh sound. Not a battle cry. More like, "Here I am, you asshole."

The dragon's head jerked, its eye following the noise.

The burst of fire came. Broad, impatient, full of anger. It struck where the noise had been.

Beowulf vanished briefly in an almost white glow. The shield before him became a flickering silhouette, then a dark blotch, then nothing. The armor glowed, the metal screaming in its own language.

Wigstan roared. It was a sound that didn't seem to come from within his body. Wulfgar cursed, wanted to rush forward, but something inside him held him back—instinct, experience, the thought that too many men in the fire at once would only mean more fuel.

The flame went out. What remained was a smell worse than anything before.

Beowulf was still standing. Sort of. The front of his armor was dark, in places already crisscrossed with small, red lines from the inside, as if his own flesh were being cooked. He gasped for air, each breath a knife.

"Still here," he gasped. "See? I could still get you with Grandma's breathing."

The dragon growled. It was a sound that could almost be interpreted as surprise. It might have been thinking something like, "Why isn't it falling over?"

Beowulf staggered. His knees gave out. It wasn't just the pain. It was the cumulative effect. The years, the blows, the nights. Everything suddenly came crashing down.

Wigstan saw it. Saw how the old man stood in the fire and yet still tried to move forward. Saw how Wulfgar was beside him, but glanced briefly over at him.

"Your moment, boy," his gaze conveyed. No heroic rhetoric. Just pure fact.

Wigstan felt his throat go dry. But his feet were moving.

The last one to stay, he thought, doesn't have to be someone who was born for it. He can simply be someone who hasn't run away yet.

He broke free from the spot he had been clinging to and ran forward, towards the fire, the gold, and an old man who was already half-cooked and still holding the sword in his hand.

Wigstan started running, and it felt like he was running into a wall of hot breath. Every step was an effort. The air was thick, the armor heavy, the ground a sea of slippery metal and old sins. He noticed his head lagging behind him somewhere. His body had taken over, this stupid, tough lump of flesh that sometimes knew more than all his thoughts combined.

Beowulf was still standing there in front of him. Like a half-charred post that the storm had forgotten to topple. His breastplate was dark, discolored in places, the chainmail beneath it glowing as if someone had filled his torso with coal. He held the sword in his hand, but you could see it trembling—not from fear, but because the muscles were slowly realizing that they were expected to do more than their age allowed.

The dragon inhaled again. Its flanks rose and fell. Between the scales, something from the wound on its belly dripped, falling onto gold and making small, smoking holes in coins, as if someone had hollowed them out with acid. The beast was furious, so furious it almost seemed offended.

Wulfgar stood beside Beowulf, shoulders hunched, face half-hidden by his helmet. Only his eyes were visible, those bright, hard points that had been there for years whenever everything else seemed to say it was all over.

"You could have stayed home, boy," he shouted to Wigstan over the roaring and snarling. "You could have chopped wood, herded cows, made children. And now you run here. Are you stupid?"

“Yes!” Wigstan roared back, surprised that he meant what he said. “But I’m already here.”

Beowulf laughed briefly, roughly and dryly, a sound that almost turned into a cough. A red stain appeared in the crack in his helmet where his mouth had been.

"Good," he gasped. "At least you're putting your stupidity to good use."

The dragon raised its claw and swiped at them, not with perfect aim—it was too large to be precise—but with enough force that the mere breeze was enough to knock them off balance. Wulfgar was half-shoved aside, slipped on a pile of chains, stumbled, and caught himself with his hand on a dented shield that had once borne a coat of arms that no one cared about now.

Wigstan ducked reflexively. The claw brushed past him, so close he could have counted the scales. The stench up close was unbearable – a mixture of stable, slaughterhouse, and old, damp leather.

"Sideways!" Beowulf wheezed. "We need to get back to the belly!"

"Back there again?" Wigstan felt his stomach churn. The thought of being within reach of that maw again was about as appealing as a bath in boiling pitch.

Wulfgar grinned, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. "If we don't hurt him more often than he hurts us, nobody will say anything nice about us later. And if I'm going to die, I at least want to know where I hit him."

They moved to the rhythm of disaster. A few steps to the left, a few forward, always in the shadow of the enormous forelimbs that dug into the gold. Every step was a dance on someone else's property. The gold wasn't theirs. The rage was.

Hrothmar detached himself from the wall. You could see how difficult each step was for him. Not because of the armor. Because of what was going through his mind. He had to go back to where he had first reached into the pile. It was as if a thief had to return to the scene of the crime, only now the scene was filled with fire and poison.

"There!" he gasped, pointing to a spot under the belly where the scales were more untidy, as if the animal had grown at some point and the pattern hadn't kept up. "There I... there was the cup I took. There was a hole... in the pile..."

"Then maybe that's exactly where he has a gap in his armor," Beowulf growled. "It's good that you've brought us at least one advantage besides your stupid burnt fingers."

The dragon reacted to the movement in its flank. Its head turned, its eye slid over it, slowly, probingly. It was that feeling of being looked at by something that isn't human, nothing you can compare yourself to. Not a prince, not a king, not a wooden idol. Only an ancient, alien greed that didn't see you as an individual, but as a moving torch.

"How do we do it?" gasped Wulfgar. "One distracts, one stabs?"

“We are not a cursed theater troupe,” Beowulf snarled. “We do everything at once and hope he doesn’t notice it all at once.”

He raised the sword, even though his arm protested. Every muscle in his shoulder joint screamed, the ribs below were like red-hot rods, crushed with every breath.

"Wigstan!" he shouted. "You take the neck! Right where it twists! If it snaps at me, you go for it. No hesitation, no thinking. Just go for it, like you're slitting a pig's throat."

Wigstan swallowed. So that was it. No grand prophecies. No gods descending from the sky to tell him he was the chosen one.

“Yes, sir,” he managed to say.

"Don't call me 'sir,' Beowulf growled. "We're both in the same filth. I'm just older."

The dragon pulled its forelegs back slightly, as if trying to stand up, to raise its torso. Gold rained down. An old helmet rolled past Wigstan, as if trying to trip him.

“Now!” roared Beowulf, and the sound was more of a ripped-open throat than a word.

He charged forward. As best as one can charge when one's lungs are half-burned. The sword traced a crooked line through the air, aiming once again at the soft spot Hrothmar had indicated.

Wulfgar went along, a heartbeat off, a sword's breadth off target. They looked like two old wolves aiming for the belly of a bear.

Wigstan ran to the left, toward the neck. The world narrowed as he ran beneath the cattle's chin. He felt the shadow above him, the heat radiating from its throat even before the fire arrived.

He didn't make a plan. Plans are for people whose opponents don't have wings.

As the head turned, Wigstan saw the gap between two scales on the neck, where the movement pulled them apart. It was nothing large. A narrow, dark strip, barely wide enough to slide a blade through.

His body decided before his mind did. He braced the shield against the ground, used it as a kick, jumped the last half step, and rammed the sword forward with both hands as far as he could.

The blade slid into the slot. At first it slipped, gliding along the hard material. Then something gave way. Something soft, resistant. Warm.

The dragon roared. Not like before. This wasn't a dominant battle cry. This was a bewildered, offended, painful howl. Like the sound of an animal realizing for the first time that it could die.

The vibration went through Wigstan's arms, through the blade, through the entire damned room. He thought his shoulder joint would pop out of his torso. He didn't let go. His hands burned, his fingers cramped, his knuckles cracked.

At the same time, Beowulf's sword plunged into his stomach again. The same spot, deeper this time, more brutally. Wulfgar followed, a blow missing, slicing through a row of scales, bending and tearing them open, the flesh beneath slapping like wet leather.

The blood shot, spurted, flowed. It wasn't a beautiful river. It was a bubbling, viscous, foul-smelling broth that wanted to go everywhere. On armor, on gold, into the air. Where it met iron, it hissed, ate its way through, leaving black stains in its wake.

Beowulf felt something run down his forearm. It tingled at first, then burned, as if someone had pushed red-hot needles under his skin. He clenched his teeth so hard they creaked inside his helmet. He didn't have time to assess the damage.

The dragon reared up. Its entire body contracted, stretched, a massive, twitching mountain of muscle, stripped of its innate arrogance. Its tail lashed out, and the rear of the gold heap exploded in a storm of metal, bone, and armor fragments.

An old warrior, who had been holding the flank, was hit by the shock. The blow struck him in the hip, a sound like breaking wood, then he was gone. No scream. Simply gone, into a wall of rock and rubble.

Wigstan was swept away. Not by the tail, but by the movement of the dragon's neck. His sword was stuck. When the dragon suddenly turned, it took the blade with it – and Wigstan.

He lost his footing, hung in mid-air for a moment, his hands clenched around the handle, his torso slammed against the scales. The helmet crashed against a bony edge at his neck, stars danced before his eyes.

"Let go," a part of him screamed. "Let go, or you'll break your arms, your back, everything."

"Hold on!" shouted the other. "If you let go, it will all have been for nothing."

He held on tight. Of course he did. Men are stupid once they've accomplished something.

The dragon jerked its head sharply upwards. Wigstan swung briefly in the air, then was torn free. He flew, uncontrolled, clumsy, crashed onto the pile of gold, bounced off, slid, tumbled over, and came to rest. Something cracked in his shoulder. His right hand released the sword. It remained lodged somewhere up there, crooked in his throat.

He tried to move his fingers. Three responded. Two didn't. Pain shot up his arm and settled in his neck.

"Still here," he gasped. "Still..." The rest of the sentence was lost in his coughing.

Beowulf saw it out of the corner of his eye. Good boy, he thought. Foolish, but good. Perhaps that's the definition of courage.

The dragon was now seriously injured. Blood dripped from its neck and belly, its flanks rising and falling faster. Every movement was a small explosion inside. It was still a monster, still huge, still capable of finishing off anything of flesh within its reach with a single breath.

But he was no longer untouchable.

Beowulf felt the old anger within him briefly become warmer than the fire.

“You see,” he snapped, more to himself than to anyone else, “in the end you’re just a sack of meat with too much embers in it.”

He wanted to press on. To go back into the wound, to cut, hack, and tear again.

Then came the head.

Not with fire this time. With teeth.

The dragon moved forward, not elegantly, almost uncoordinated, driven by pain and an instinctive "If I'm going to die, then I'd better have something between my jaws."

Beowulf had run out of time. The blow he had planned remained only a half-baked attempt. He still raised his sword, but he was too slow. Not because he was a coward. Because his bones were old and his ribs were broken.

The mouth didn't close completely. It wasn't a clean bite. More like a brutal thrust with the teeth.

The jaws gripped him from the side. Scales, teeth, bone, all in one. The spikes slid over the armor, finding a gap where the chainmail met the plate.

Something penetrated. Deeply. A hot, burning pain exploded in his side. Not like a cut. Like a stake being driven in. He simultaneously felt something hard break inside him—bone, presumably—and something else pour in, warm, foreign. Dragon's mouth. Dragon's breath. Dragon sickness.

The world became small.

He only half heard his own scream. It was there, but it was muffled by the bellowing of the cattle, the clinking of the gold, the sound steel makes when it penetrates something that doesn't want to be penetrated.

Then the head let go.

Beowulf stumbled, stumbled backward, sword still in hand, his legs searching for purchase and finding only slipping coins. He didn't fall spectacularly. He sank. Like a house whose foundations have been stolen.

Wulfgar was at his side immediately. Knees in gold, hands on his shoulders, eyes wide.

“Beo,” he gasped. “Beo, damn it…”

Beowulf wanted to say something. A joke, something silly to lighten the moment. Instead of words, blood came. A dark gush that poured from his mouth, spread through his beard, and dripped onto the gold, making it look no better.

The old king felt the heat drain from his side as if he were an inflated tube. Every breath hurt. Every attempt to inhale drove the blade of pain deeper.

"Okay," he thought, surprisingly clearly. "Then it's probably time."

He looked up. The dragon was staggering. Yes, that's what you could call it. A mountain like that could stagger. Its neck was askew, the wound on its belly continued to drip, its tail lashed erratically, striking rock, gold, emptiness.

Wigstan, half dazed, half battered, tried to get back to his knees. Hrothmar was still standing against the wall, his eyes wide, his hands useless.

"One," thought Beowulf. "One who will stay."

He grabbed Wulfgar by the armor and pulled him down towards him.

"Not now," he gasped. "Don't play the hero now. Help him." His gaze went to Wigstan.

Wulfgar understood. You could see the thought working on his face. The reflex to stay with his friend, who had been more than a king for decades, was strong. But stronger was that old, tenacious sense of what needed to be done.

“If you look away from me here and let me die,” Beowulf gasped, “that’s no loss. If you leave him alone, that’s one.”

Wulfgar growled something that might later be interpreted as a curse against the gods. Then he let go of Beowulf, stood up, and staggered over to Wigstan.

The boy was half-erect, his left hand on the ground, his right arm at an unhealthy angle.

"Can you still stand?" barked Wulfgar.

“I… I think,” Wigstan stammered.

"Good," said Wulfgar. "Then do it. He's done his part. Now it's our turn."

Beowulf lay in the gold, his face half in shadow, half in the reddish flicker of the cave. He felt his blood seeping into the cracks between the coins. Part of him found it ironic: for decades he had tried to hold onto wealth, and now he was contributing to it himself.

The dragon wasn't dead. Not yet. But death had laid its hand on his shoulder.

Wigstan stood up unsteadily, Wulfgar beside him. Neither were gods. Just men with broken bodies, burned lungs, and broken spirits.

The last one standing, Wigstan thought, is not the strongest. Only the one who still has steps left.

Beowulf watched them go, as best he could. His vision was blurry, the edges of his eyes dark. But he saw enough to know: he was no longer in front. And that was alright.

"Come on," he whispered, more air than words. "Show him he's not the only one with a fire in his belly."

Then he lowered his hand holding the sword. The steel slid into the gold, making a soft sound.

The battle was not yet over. But Beowulf's part in it was almost over.

In the shadow of the dragon's flame, someone thought, it will become clear what remains of us.

CHAPTER 27 – In the Shadow of the Dragon Flame

The dragon was injured, but an injured animal is no better opponent, only a worse host. The cave was no longer a room, but a maw of smoke, embers, and distorted sounds. Everywhere something clanged, creaked, or dripped. Metal, blood, stone. You could no longer tell where one thing ended and another began.

Beowulf lay in the gold like a discarded king on a heap of broken promises. His armor was dark at the front, glowing red in places, as if his chest were slowly turning into a furnace from

within. Every breath sounded like a poorly oiled bellows. The blood in his side found its own way out, creeping through cracks where only dust had sat yesterday.

Wulfgar forced himself to tear his gaze away. It was as if he were tearing a piece of himself off and letting it fall to the ground. But he knew what Beowulf had said: He who lies on the ground is finished. He who can still stand has no time for farewells.

"Later," he murmured, more to himself than to anyone else. "If there even is a later."

The dragon wasn't standing properly. It was hanging in on itself, like a drunkard trying to hold on to his own rage. Its neck was crooked, the wound where Wigstan's sword had been lodged was steaming, thick blood trickling down its scales, eating tiny holes in everything it touched. Its belly was ripped open, not wide enough to simply burst open, but enough to remind it that even a mountain has internal organs.

Every movement of the cattle made the whole room tremble. Gold slipped, bones cracked, old helmets turned to metal rubble. The air was full of minute particles, tiny glowing flies made of sparks and dust that stung the eyes and settled on the tongue.

Wigstan was standing again. Barely, but he was standing. His right arm hung at an odd angle, his shoulder burning like a nest of wasps that had been doused with boiling water. Every pulse sent a wave of pain through his side, as if someone were hammering his nerves.

"You look awful," Wulfgar observed as he stood next to him.

"You too," Wigstan gasped.

"Then it fits," said Wulfgar. "Handsome men rarely die properly."

The dragon took another breath, deeper, more labored. You could hear it, like a wheeze through lungs too old for this shit. And yet, there was still enough strength left to grill everything in sight.

"We have to bring him down," Wulfgar panted. "If he stays on top of the pile, we have no chance. We can't get near him without being turned into torches every other second."

Wigstan stared at the cattle's front legs. The claws dug into the treasure, holding it as if it were all he had ever had in life. In a way, it was.

“What if we take away the ground beneath him?” Wigstan asked, and in his voice there was suddenly that bright, irrational something sometimes called an “idea.” “He’s hanging on to gold. This isn’t a rock. This is scrap metal that’s moving.”

Wulfgar followed his gaze. He saw the heaps, the edges, the gaps. The whole glistening chaos beneath the belly.

"You want to pull the rug out from under a mountain?"

“Maybe,” said Wigstan. “Or at least steal one of his steps.”

The cattle bellowed again, not with full force, more out of reflex. The cave responded with a dull rumble. Boulders somewhere above broke loose, rolled, and fell somewhere into the darkness. No one had time to look where.

"Good," grunted Wulfgar. "Then do it. You go for his legs, I'll stay by his stomach as long as I can. If he falls over, the world will cough. Maybe it'll pull him down with him."

"Which arm, the hell?" Wigstan gasped, trying to move his right hand even an inch. It felt like his shoulder would explode if he pushed any further.

“With the one who’s still listening,” Wulfgar said. “Left, right, who cares. Your body knows what it can do. You have to trust it anyway, whether you want to or not.”

They moved again. Not like heroes. Like workers standing too close to a burning machine, hoping they aren't the first to be consumed.

Wulfgar turned sideways, back towards the belly. Beowulf had already made his mark there, carving the first "You are not immortal" into the scales. Wulfgar aimed just wide, at another spot where the plates had shifted under the pressure when the dragon had convulsed in pain.

He swung his arm back as far as his back allowed and struck.

The blade struck hard material – a blow that shot through the arm and up to the shoulders. Then something gave way again. Another crack, another gush of that disgustingly hot broth. It splashed onto shield, helmet, chainmail, making the metal stink and hiss.

Wulfgar screamed this time. Not out of heroic pathos. Out of naked, ordinary pain. His forearm plate softened in seconds, the leather beneath it began to scorch. The skin underneath became a field test.

He jerked his arm back, almost throwing the shield away as if someone had placed a red-hot stone on it. His fingers wouldn't let go of the grip; habit is a stubborn whore, but the pain was stronger. The shield fell into the gold, swallowed up by coins and rings that immediately mingled with the splashes of acid.

“Shit,” he gasped. “Damn it…”

The dragon trembled. The whole massive thing. Neck, belly, flanks. The tail swung out uncontrollably, crashed against rock, and caused a corner of the cave to collapse. Sparks flew. A cloud of dust cascaded down from above, mingling with smoke as if someone had shoveled another layer of dirt into the mix.

Wigstan, meanwhile, had sunk deep. As deep as one can go when one's legs are wobbly and one's head feels like a blacksmith is working inside it. He wasn't running, he was more stumbling purposefully.

His shield had seen better days after the last action. He no longer held it in front of him, but sideways, as an edge, to push his way through the pile. He was looking for the spot where the gold seemed loosest – where the dragon had been lying most heavily on it.

"If you fall," he thought, "you fall deep."

With his left hand, the one that was still usable, he stabbed into the pile. Not with the sword—it was still lodged in his throat—but with whatever he could find: the stump of a spear, a bent dagger, anything sharp within reach. He stabbed, pried, and tore. Coins slid, chains came loose, and small avalanches of metal tumbled downwards, away beneath his belly.

The dragon, who had previously been more preoccupied with fire and pain, sensed the loss. Not consciously. Instinctively. One foot shifted its weight incorrectly. The talon struck empty air. Gold gave way, slipped away.

The front right wheel sank in, deeper than the others. For a moment, the whole thing hung crooked. Like a table with three legs trying to balance on a fourth that had suddenly been pulled away.

Wigstan ripped with all his might. He felt his fingertips splitting, blood and sweat making the handle of the improvised lever slippery. He didn't care. He wasn't thinking about fame, songs, or "telling the story later." He was only thinking: "More. One more piece. Just one more."

The pile collapsed. Part of the treasure the dragon had stacked beneath it tumbled down like an avalanche. Armor plates, coins, chains, half a graveyard of weapons – everything slid downwards, pulling the foundation out from under the dragon's foreleg.

The dragon crumpled. Not an elegant movement. More like an uncontrolled slide. The front half of its body buckled, its chest crashing deeper into the remaining gold. Its head jerked downwards. Its snout nearly struck the ground, crushing an ancient chest from which a torrent of dusty parchment scraps erupted, instantly bursting into flames.

All the cattle bellowed, this time in sheer panic. The sound was different. Less "I'm going to destroy you," more "what the hell is happening to me?"

Wulfgar seized the moment, as best as a man with a half-burned forearm and flickering joints could. He lunged again at the stomach, this time lower, to where the object had lost its grip. His sword cut once more, a rough notch, not an artful thrust.

The wound grew larger. Not by much, but enough that more of the internal filth was forced out.

The dragon flinched. And then came what Wigstan would later always call "the fall" in his mind.

Not because the beast fell majestically into the abyss. But because it simply toppled sideways, as if someone had swept its legs out from under it. Its body half-rolled, its tail lashing across the space in a wild, desperate movement, striking rock, a dead body, a pile of gold, an old sign, more rock. Everything became jumbled together.

A pressure wave, hot, heavy, full of smoke and dust, rolled through the chamber. Wigstan was thrown off his feet again, flew onto his back, and felt his already damaged shoulder hit the ground somewhere. Wulfgar slammed to the side, slid a bit, his sword flying from his hand and disappearing under debris.

The dragon now lay askew, half on its side, half on the precipice of its own treasure. The wound on its belly gaped open, the gash on its neck glowed like a badly healed memory. It

tried to right itself, but couldn't quite get up. One foreleg searched for purchase and found only slipping metal. The other was wedged in the shifted mass of gold and rubble.

Every movement made everything worse. The gold slid further away, the belly tore further, blood flowed in streams, sawing through metal like a raging river.

“He’s falling,” Wigstan gasped, more to himself than to anyone else. “He’s really falling.”

“Not enough yet,” Wulfgar rattled, trying to get back to his knees. His legs trembled like two old branches in a storm. “As long as he breathes, he’ll eat us. We must…”

“…keep at it,” came a hoarse voice from the floor.

Beowulf.

Wigstan turned his head. The old man was still lying there, half-sunken, his hand without a sword in the glitter that now smelled of blood. He had somehow rolled his helmet to the side, revealing his face. Soot, ash, blood. His eyes were half-open, the whites reddened, but clearer than they should be for someone who had lost so much.

"You won't stop," he wheezed. "Not now. If he turns, it's all over. Pull him up from the bottom..." He broke into a cough, an ugly, wet sound. Another gush of dark red filth came from his mouth.

“It’s our turn,” said Wulfgar, looking at him as if trying to memorize his face. “Lie down, old dog. Your shift is over.”

Beowulf grinned. It looked terrible, with all the blood in his teeth. Still, it was a grin. "I thought that too... when I was young," he whispered. "It was never like that."

The dragon was panting. Yes, it was. Its flanks rose and fell more frantically, the air coming from its mouth was still hot, but no longer so steady. More like spurts, like a man trying to look cool after a long race and nearly collapsing in the process.

Wigstan fought his way back to his feet. His left arm still worked, his legs sort of too. His right arm was just dead weight. No matter.

"If he's lying there..." he panted, "...we can go in. All the way."

"You want to go into the hole?" Wulfgar stared at him as if he had just suggested walking barefoot through a pot of boiling stones.

"Where else?" Wigstan looked at the wounds on his stomach. The gashes were larger than any armor could possibly be. It was dark inside, glowing, wet. The stench was indescribable, a mixture of entrails, old fire, and something that came from so deep within the mountain that no one had a word for it.

"If we keep poking him from the outside, it will take too long," he gasped. "If one of us is still inside, if he... stops... holding it in..."

He didn't finish speaking. Wulfgar understood anyway.

“To die inside,” he said. “In this cursed oven.”

“Dying outside isn’t any nicer either,” Wigstan muttered.

They stood there, two men in iron, one half burned, the other half broken, in the shadow of the dragon's flame. Before them lay the belly, open like an invitation to hell. Behind them, the exit, which seemed very far away.

Beowulf could only see them vaguely. But he saw that they weren't running away. That they were standing still.

"Last dance," he thought. "Not mine. Hers."

The dragon wheezed again. An ugly, gurgling sound.

Wulfgar and Wigstan exchanged a look that contained everything: fear, anger, resignation, something like humor that refused to die completely.

"Come on, lad," said Wulfgar gruffly. "Anyone who wants to get in has to go now."

And in the shadow of the dragon's flame, Wigstan took the first step forward, towards the wound, into a mouth without teeth, but with enough embers to turn a human being into nothing more than a story.

Wigstan stood before the ripped-open side of the animal, feeling as if he were standing before a slaughterhouse without a door. The wound gaped like a badly closed mouth, from which something was trying to escape that even the dragon could no longer contain. What was flowing out was not blood as he knew it. It was thicker, somewhere between mud and oil, and hot enough that the air shimmered over it. It smelled as if someone had funneled every stable, every battlefield, and every hearth in the world into this belly.

He felt his stomach clench. Not from fear. From disgust. Fear was already there, it had long since taken root in his bones. The disgust was new.

Wulfgar gasped beside him, his burned forearm half-drawn towards him, his face contorted as if he were renegotiating every single bone. "If you go in there," he said gruffly, "you won't come out clean."

“I’m not getting out of this clean either way,” Wigstan managed to say. “No matter what.”

Part of him still just wanted to leave. That old instinct, the one that's in everyone: away from the fire, away from the stench, away from the hole. But it had been overruled so often by now that it only grumbled quietly. Against that, another, weary thought persisted: If I turn back now, it won't take me back to the beginning. Only to a life where I breathe like that dragon at night and always think I should have…

"This thing won't die on its own," Wulfgar blurted out. "It won't just burn out politely. It needs someone to pull the plug."

“You can’t,” said Wigstan. “Your arm…”

Wulfgar examined the burned forearm, which was already beginning to take on an odd sheen. The skin beneath felt as if someone had replaced it with metal and forgotten to include the joint.

“I can still hold a curse,” he said. “But that in there…” He shook his head. “That’s your dance, kid.”

“Don’t call me boy,” Wigstan murmured automatically.

"Then don't act like one."

Behind them, someone coughed loudly, with a rattling sound. Beowulf. The world hadn't yet extinguished him; it was merely letting him slowly seep into itself. He lay there, his armor half-opened, as if the page itself had decided it had had enough. His hand groped in the gold, not for riches, but for something to hold onto, because gravity was asking too many questions.

“What… is…”, he began, and his voice sounded like someone speaking through a hole in their stomach.

“We’ll get him all the way down,” Wulfgar shouted without turning around. “He’s already hanging. The rest is… internal work.”

“Inside,” croaked Beowulf, coughing again. “Always… in the end… inside.”

Wigstan swallowed. His throat was as dry as sandy soil in summer. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“If I go in,” he said quietly, “who will keep him out? If he tries to come back up?”

Wulfgar grinned crookedly. "Me. As long as I'm still standing, someone will hold him by the stomach. And if I fall, at least he'll get a kick in the guts before I'm on the ground."

It wasn't a pretty tactic. Not a plan you could write down on parchment. Just two men who had decided not to behave like fodder.

Wigstan moved closer to the wound. The heat was brutal. The air vibrated. He felt his eyes burn, tears streamed down their faces, and then burned away again. The edges of the wound—sheds of scale, torn skin, a layer of flesh that looked as if it had never seen the sun—twitched with every movement of the cattle.

"I don't have a sword anymore," he muttered, and only now did he really notice.

Wulfgar looked around, searching among the rubble of gold and scrap metal. His hand reached into the pile and pulled out something that had once been a fine sword. The blade was bent slightly at the tip, but the rest was intact.

"Take this," he said, throwing it over to him. "It's not pretty, but sharp enough to cause trouble in the dirt."

Wigstan caught it with his left hand, his fingers closing around the handle as if they had been born to do so. His right hand hung uselessly at his side.

“If you fall over,” said Wulfgar, “at least try to stay lying in some important part. Maybe then it will trip over you from the inside.”

"Reassuring," Wigstan murmured. Even so, the dry humor pulled him out of the cold. Nobility and gods had never meant much to him. But men who could still crack jokes right before being burned at the stake held a place in his heart.

The dragon wheezed as if every breath cost him more than it gave him. His eye flickered, searched, lost sight, found again. It was no longer an all-knowing gaze. It was that of an animal realizing the world was suddenly too big.

Wigstan placed his free hand on the edge of the wound. The heat immediately seeped through the glove, biting into the skin beneath. He grunted, but pressed down anyway. He needed something to hold onto.

"Breathe," he said to himself. "In. Out. In."

He placed his foot on what looked like a solid edge—in reality a lumpy mass of gold, scales, and flesh—and pulled himself up. It was as if he were stepping into a mouth that hadn't yet grasped that eating could also be walking.

The inside was worse than anything outside. No space, no structure, just a glowing cavern of flesh, muscle, mucus, and something that looked like embers on wet coal. Everything was in motion, in its own rhythm, unrelated to his heartbeat.

The stench was so thick that he could taste it, as if someone had placed dirty ash on his tongue.

He was half-kneeling, half-squatting, sword in hand, his feet searching for purchase on something slippery yet sticky. Beneath him, the beast's insides throbbed like a broken forge.

"Where the hell do you stab something like that?" he thought, and for the first time something inside him laughed, briefly, hysterically.

Wulfgar's voice drifted in from outside, muffled and distorted by flesh and noise. "Don't think! Chop right in where it's soft and glowing! Imagine you're standing inside a liver that's way too big!"

“I don’t know what a liver looks like!” Wigstan wanted to shout back, but the sentence died in the stench.

He drew back his sword. As best he could in the cramped, greasy hole. The sword slid down, cutting into something warm and resistant. It felt like he was ripping open a living, wet barrel.

The dragon screamed. The sound came from everywhere: from the cave, from his chest, from the ground. Wigstan felt it in his spine, at the base of his skull. His whole body shook. He was almost thrown out. Only his hand, gripping the blade in his flesh, held him in place.

He stabbed again. And again. Not precisely. Not with a steady aim. Just deeper and deeper into whatever wanted to drip, twitch, bleed, and steam. The sword slid, caught, was pulled, tearing away shreds.

Beneath him, it felt as if his entire abdomen was twitching. Something was pumping, releasing, pumping, releasing. He encountered something that looked like a knot of muscle, thicker than his thigh, hot as freshly forged iron.

He rammed the blade in as deep as he could. And left it in.

The dragon pulled itself together, tensed up, as if it wanted to shake off the whole world.

Outside, Wulfgar saw the enormous beast contort itself. Its flanks contracted, its belly rose as if trying to spit out whoever was inside.

"Hold on tight, you lunatic," growled Wulfgar, although Wigstan could not hear him.

He himself moved back to the side, as close as he could without being completely cooked. He pulled with his good hand, grabbed a torn scale, and ripped and pried as if he were skinning a tough animal.

The blood – that black, hissing stuff – sprayed down his chest, eating into leather and metal. He roared, but he didn't let go. He kept pulling until his fingers were almost gone.

The dragon lost its stability. That which held it together from within was destroyed, piece by piece. Its breath came only in gasps. In, out. In. Stop. In again, with difficulty, as if its own smoke were suffocating it from within.

Wigstan suddenly felt the ground beneath him give way. Not like a hole opening up. Like a net tearing. The interior became softer, more formless. He realized he was sinking deeper.

"Shit," he whispered. "Shit, shit..."

He tried to grab the sword, to pull it out again. It was stuck. Wedged in flesh, bone, something hard that couldn't decide what it wanted to be.

The walls around him twitched, pressed, wanted to throw him out again – or crush him, like a foreign object.

"If you die here," he suddenly thought clearly, "at least no one lied: you really are in the story of the dragon."

He laughed briefly, bitterly. The sound was swallowed by the rumble beneath him.

Outside, the massive body continued to tip over slowly. One front leg finally slipped away, a hind leg reflexively kicked against the rock once more, tearing out a piece of wall that shattered somewhere in the darkness.

The cave itself seemed to groan along. Hairline cracks ran through the upper parts of the rock, dust trickled down, smaller chunks broke off, and rained down on gold and corpses.

Wulfgar staggered backward, almost thrown beneath the tail, which whipped through the air in a final reflex action. He ducked, feeling the air rush so close it touched his helmet.

"Die," he gasped, looking down at his stomach. "Die like a proper animal."

Beowulf heard all of this only as if through water. The sounds were there—roars, crashes, rage—but they arrived muffled, as if someone had drawn a blanket over the world. His gaze jumped, lingering on details: a single coin floating in his blood; a burnt leather strap clinging to a dead arm; the crack in the rock high above, slowly widening.

He no longer thought in sentences. More in short, raw images. Field. Hall. The face of a woman whose name he'd forgotten, but not the way she'd stared at him when he told her her husband wasn't coming back. The dull feeling he'd had then. The same feeling he had now: You're the one left to say it.

"Now they'll be voiceless," he thought. "Maybe that's for the best."

The dragon made one last attempt to stand upright. Its head lifted, its neck tensed, its jaws opened as if it wanted to fetch fire one last time, just a small torch, as a sign.

Nothing came out but smoke. A thick, black swirl poured from its mouth, spreading throughout the cave and obscuring their vision.

Wigstan felt the inner world beneath him finally give way. His muscles softened, his structure cracked. He tried to grab hold of the wound's edges, but slipped. The animal's body sank, and with it, everything inside.

“If he falls completely, he will bury me inside himself,” he thought, and somewhere in that thought there was a sick sense of humor: to be eaten by the dragon and then buried with it was at least consistent.

Wulfgar could see almost nothing. The smoke robbed him of light, obscured his vision. He felt only vibrations, heard the ragged breathing of the enormous man.

Then, suddenly, there was a different sound. No roar. No crash.

A long, heavy groan – like the breaking of an overly old tree.

The dragon finally collapsed. Its head toppled, its snout struck the ground, its teeth grinding against the rock. The neck followed, heavy and sluggish. Its flanks sank, its belly pressed into its own treasure, which continued to give way; everything slid, rolled, and tumbled.

The vibration in the ground subsided. Not completely. But noticeably.

Something broke inside Wigstan. Not in his body—there was already enough damage there—but in the noise. The rhythm he had felt all along, this in and out, this thumping undercurrent—it stopped.

No heart left. No forge. Only aftershocks.

“He…” he managed, his mouth full of dirt and stench. “He is…”

He didn't say the word. He didn't trust it.

Outside, Wulfgar knelt in the gold, coughing, spitting black phlegm, blinking against the smoke.

"Wigstan!" he roared. "If you're still alive, make some noise!"

Inside the collapsing, half-frozen meat-filled structure, Wigstan tried to breathe. His chest rose and fell; the stench was so thick it felt like he was inhaling coal.

He made a sound. Not a clear scream. A rough, hoarse wheeze, more animal than human. But it was there.

Wulfgar heard it. Very faintly, but enough.

"Still here," he muttered. "The damn boy is still here."

In the shadow of the dragon's flame, between falling rocks and dying fire, the monster had stopped moving.

Whether the boy made it back outside was another question.

The world after the death of a dragon is not a sudden peace. It is chaos, where the most powerful things have simply ceased to move. The rest are still trembling.

Wulfgar knelt in a pile of gold, blood, and rubble, trying to convince his lungs that air was still an option. Every breath was a gamble: would he get oxygen or just more smoke into his chest? He coughed black phlegm into the coins, which stared back at him like small, offended eyes.

The enormous thing in front of him now lay askew, its head half-turned, its neck bent, its flanks only twitching whenever a muscle reflexively flickered. It was as if a mountain range were slowly realizing that it was no longer a mountain range, but a pile of rocks.

"He's not moving anymore," he murmured, more to soothe his own ears than anyone else.

He was close enough to see the eye. No longer glowing. Just dark, dull, as if someone had closed the world inside it. No divine radiance, no "gaze of eternity." Just a dead eye in a dead head.

"That's what they all end up looking like," thought Wulfgar. "Kings, monsters, dogs. Eventually, one of them turns out the light."

The smoke was still there. It hung in the cave, thick, tenacious, as if the dragon had deliberately poisoned the air in its final seconds. And above it, quieter but steady, one could hear the crackling of rocks that were changing their minds. Small stones breaking loose. Cracks widening.

"The cave dies with him," Wulfgar murmured. "That was to be expected. Nobody goes alone."

"Wigstan!" he roared again, this time more strained. "Say you're alive, you damned bastard!"

For a moment, nothing happened. Only the echo of one's own scream, mixed with the afterglow of the room.

Then, very close to the wound, a sound. Not a word, not a scream. A sardine-can sound from the chest and throat.

"Here…"

Wulfgar stood unsteadily, his legs like two broken pillars that still had to hold on. He stumbled to the gaping side of the beast, where the edges of the wound slowly stopped twitching. The blood still flowed, but more sluggishly, as if it itself were growing tired.

"Hang in there," he growled. "If I get you out now, you'll have to listen to me for the rest of your damned life."

He grasped the edge; the glove hissed. The heat burned leather, skin, anything in between. He ignored it. Pain had become like old acquaintances he no longer greeted when they entered the room.

"Pull," he said to himself. "Don't think. Just pull."

It was as if he were pulling on a wet, slippery sack too big for two hands. The inside had given way. The dragon no longer offered any resistance. But the flesh stuck, clinging on, refusing to release its guest.

Inside, Wigstan fought to avoid becoming a permanent part of the interior. The light filtering through the wound was blurred, flickering, reddish-brown. He felt his body slowly closing in on his vision, bit by bit, as if trying to protect him from what had happened.

"Just a little more," he thought. "Just one more breath..."

The hand that grabbed him came like a blow. Rough, heavy, painful. Wulfgar's grip wasn't gentle. He caught part of the armor, perhaps a strap, perhaps a piece of chainmail, perhaps just the bare shoulder—Wigstan couldn't tell. He only knew: something was pulling.

He let go of where he had been holding on. The blade inside, half-embedded in some organ, remained behind. The flesh squelched as if someone were pulling a paw out of a swamp.

The pain as he was dragged through the wound was excruciating. His right shoulder screamed as if someone were yanking on it with a hook. His ribs, already in a bad mood, protested. He slipped, banged his shin on some bone, and his helmet struck a scale.

Then he was outside. Halfway. Wulfgar moved on, cursing in a language that even the gods couldn't have understood.

"Come on, you damned bundle of meat," he growled. "I don't want to die in this shithole just because you're jamming yourself against the door."

One last jerk. Wigstan came out like a poorly wrapped roast from the oven. He landed on the gold, slid a bit, and lay still. The world spun. His stomach tried to release its contents, but only half succeeded. He gagged, coughed, and spat out something that tasted more of soot and stomach fluid than of life.

Wulfgar fell to his knees beside him. His burned forearm trembled uncontrollably, his other hand propped him up on a pile of coins that felt cold and utterly uninteresting.

"You're alive," he gasped.

“Not yet,” Wigstan managed. “I think… I stink worse than that thing.”

"Then you belong here," Wulfgar coughed.

Above them, the rock creaked louder. A boulder the size of a horse's head broke away from the ceiling, crashed down, struck a corner of the pile of gold, shattered in half, and hurled splinters everywhere.

One of them collided with Beowulf's armor, rolled into his blood, and lay there like an ugly little monument.

"We have to get out of here," Wulfgar snapped. "Now. Before the mountain decides it wants us for dessert."

Wigstan tried to stand up. His legs were only partially functional. His left hand was still usable, but his right hand was a problem incarnate.

“Beowulf,” he said, and the name hurt his mouth, as if he hadn’t earned it.

Wulfgar glanced over. The old man was still lying there. He hadn't simply vanished from the world. He was stuck, somewhere between "there" and "gone." His eyes were open, but deeper. Deeper than the room itself.

They ran – or stumbled – towards him. Every step was an effort. Not just because of their own pain. The ground vibrated, the stones made noises as if they were discussing whom to kill first.

Beowulf saw them coming. Or perhaps he no longer saw them clearly, but he knew someone was there. He understood the situation. He had seen too many caves not to know what the end sounds like when not just a body, but an entire environment collapses.

"Lift him up," croaked Wulfgar, more to himself than to Wigstan. "We'll take him with us."

Wigstan stared at him as if he were completely insane. "We can't carry him," he gasped. "He's heavier than both of us combined. And we're half dead."

Wulfgar nevertheless grabbed Beowulf under the shoulders. "I'd rather die trying to drag him out than have to explain later why I left him lying here like a dead dog."

Wigstan gritted his teeth. It was the kind of decision he had always hated: the one between two kinds of shit.

He grabbed Beowulf by the side as best he could without touching the open wound. Warm. Slippery. Blood everywhere. He did it anyway.

"On three," croaked Wulfgar. "One... two..."

On the count of three, they lifted him. Beowulf was heavy. Not just because of the armor. Because of all the years, the stories, the guilt, the victories. A body like a sack stuffed full of the past.

He groaned, but not loudly. It was more of an exhalation from a hole in his side.

They got it halfway up, dragging and stumbling. Every step a small miracle, one that none of the gods had paid for.

"Leave me alone," Beowulf murmured eventually, his voice barely more than air. "You... shall..."

"Shut your mouth," Wulfgar snarled. "You talk, therefore you live. As long as you talk, we'll drag you along. If you stop, we'll keep talking for you. Either way, you can't avoid seeing the outcome."

Wigstan gasped. Every muscle burned. His shoulder was one large, screaming patch. His knees wobbled.

“If I fall,” he thought, “all three of us will fall. Then we will be the ugliest monument this cave has ever seen.”

They worked their way forward. Away from the dead dragon. Away from the stinking mountain of gold. Away from the hole that had taken them and given nothing back.

The cave continued to make noise. Smaller collapses, clouds of dust, cracks. At one point, a larger boulder crashed to the ground so close behind them that the shockwave pushed them forward.

"Faster," panted Wulfgar. "He's starting to sit down."

“I can’t go any faster,” Wigstan gasped. “My legs…”

"Don't lie," Wulfgar growled. "They'll just fall when the time comes."

They reached the passage that led back to the crevice. The floor here was narrower, but firmer. Less gold, more rock. But also more scree, freshly fallen from the ceiling.

Somewhere behind them, a long, deep crash could be heard. Something large had given way. Perhaps part of the ceiling over the treasure. Perhaps the pile itself, finally collapsing.

“Don’t turn around,” Wigstan whispered. “If we see what’s happening back there, we won’t be able to move forward.”

They dragged Beowulf down the passage. Sometimes they carried him, sometimes he was half-dragged along, sometimes he just hung there. His boots scraped against stone, leaving a trail of blood and dirt behind him, mingling with the dust of the cave.

Beowulf was only half aware of it now. The pain in his side had become a dull, all-encompassing roar. The rest of his body felt strangely light. Not pleasantly light. More as if all the outstanding debts were being gathered up and taken from his hands, one by one.

He blinked once and saw a sliver of light before him. Not a beautiful one, not a divine one. Just that cold, gray outside light, filtering through a crack in the rock.

“There,” he thought, “is outside. Any outside. Doesn’t matter.”

The passage narrowed. They had to twist, push, and heave it. Wulfgar cursed like someone trying to get a barrel through a door that was too narrow. Wigstan clenched his teeth so tightly he thought they would shatter in his mouth.

And then they were actually at the crevice.

The air beyond was different. Still bad, but less dead. No heartbeat in the walls anymore. Only one's own.

"Out," gasped Wulfgar. "Just get out."

They got Beowulf halfway through the crack, then pressed themselves in behind. The rock cut into slabs and straps, tearing a few more scratches into already battered bodies.

Then they stumbled outside.

The air outside the cave was like a blow. Cold in comparison, even though it still felt warm from the scorched landscape. The sky was gray, heavy, but at least it was there. No rooftops looming over them anymore.

They let Beowulf slide a little way down the slope until he came to rest on a flatter spot. Wulfgar fell beside him, Wigstan beside him. Three bodies that looked as if someone had thrown them out of a furnace because they were finished.

For a moment, nothing could be heard but their panting. The dragon behind them was silent. The mountain no longer breathed through that hole.

Wigstan coughed, something dark and warm coming from his lungs. It felt heavy, as if he were coughing up a piece of himself.

"Blood," he thought dazedly. "You can't just cough up blood."

Wulfgar also spat, a mixture of soot, mucus, and red. He looked at the old man.

Beowulf lay on his back, gazing at the sky. No sparkle, no divine radiance. Just two tired eyes in a face that had more scars than skin.

"Well," whispered Wulfgar. "You wanted one hill. Now you have two. One in the back, one in the belly."

Beowulf tried to laugh. It sounded like a cough that made the world shake briefly.

The dragon was dead. The cave was slowly becoming its tomb.

But out there, in the air that smelled of ash and the future, two men were coughing up blood. And one of them was a king who realized that every breath was a battle in itself.

CHAPTER 28 – You can't just cough up blood

The first thing he tasted was iron. Not the clean iron of a freshly sharpened sword, but the dull, musty iron of old blood that had lain in his own mouth for too long. He coughed, or his body did it for him, and something dark splashed onto the stone beside his head. It looked as if someone had squeezed the shadow out of him.

Beowulf stared up at the sky, which looked as if someone had thrown a wet, gray rag over the world. No heroic sunset, no divine glow, just a miserable, smeared day over a mountain that had just spat out a monster.

"You're coughing up blood," Wulfgar observed beside him, as if commenting on the weather.

Beowulf slowly turned his head. It felt as if his neck was made of glass. Move it too quickly, and it would all break.

Wulfgar looked no better. His face was sooty, one eye half-swollen shut, his armor discolored and charred in places. His right forearm was a single red, swollen mass, still emitting smoke.

Wigstan lay a little further down the slope, like someone forgotten halfway up the stairs. His chest rose and fell jerkily, every movement a small struggle. His right shoulder was at an angle that nature didn't approve of.

“You cough up blood too,” Beowulf murmured, more than an answer, more than revenge.

Wulfgar spat, briefly examining the red in the dust. "I've spat out worse after bad nights," he said. "But you're right. This won't go away with water and sleep."

Beowulf laughed briefly, and the attempt was a mistake. His side burned as if someone had shoved a torch inside him. He gasped, which in turn made him cough again. Even redder, darker, thicker.

"You can't just cough up blood," he thought. "This isn't a cold, not bad mead. This is the bill your body gives you for acting like a tool and not flesh for too long."

The hill above them steamed softly. Not dramatically. More like a stove that's been left on. A fine, dark plume rose from the crevice they'd crawled out of. No more fire, no more clear smoke. Something in between. The air still smelled of burning, but no longer of that active, ravenous blaze. More like the ashes that followed.

“He’s really dead,” Wigstan said after a while that felt longer than it was. His voice was rough, as if through gravel. “I… I can’t hear anything anymore. No humming. No…” He searched for the word. “No heart.”

Beowulf felt the ground beneath him. It was still warm, but no longer alive. No pulse in the stones, no faint vibration from the beast's breath. Only the remnants of the heat.

"Dead," he repeated quietly. "Finally, something that's happening before me."

Wulfgar tilted his head back and squinted at the grey clouds above. "You sound as if you're offended that he beat you to it."

“Perhaps I am,” Beowulf murmured. “We have prepared for each other for a long time. I would have found it more polite if we had left at the same time.”

Wigstan tried to stand up. A jerk, a groan, a half-hearted attempt to see the world from a higher perspective again. He managed to get onto his elbows, said nothing, and stayed there for a while. His body had its own sequence of catastrophes.

“I… got him from the inside,” he finally said, as if he needed to confirm it to himself. “Not pretty. Not clever. But deep.”

"That was enough," replied Wulfgar. "He's down, you're alive. In good times, that's what you call a victory."

Wigstan sighed. "Doesn't feel like a victory. Feels like someone used me as a wedge."

Beowulf let his head fall again, feeling the stone press against the back of his head. "That's how it is," he thought. "The world uses you, and if you're lucky, something bigger than yourself breaks in the process."

From a distance, the scorched land was visible. Stripes of black, brown wounds in the earth, charred tree stumps that jutted into the sky like burnt-out fingers. Interspersed among them were patches of life. Greenery that refused to give up.

“The fields…” Wigstan murmured, more to himself. “We have lost so much.”

“We?” Beowulf snorted. “The fields were never yours. They were never really mine. They were always just the carpet under our feet that we trampled as if no one had to pay for it.”

He tried to sit up. The attempt was pathetic. His muscles cooperated briefly, then the wound in his side protested louder. It felt as if his own body were kicking him and saying, "Lie back down, old man."

Wulfgar noticed the attempt, slipped a hand under Beowulf's shoulder; his burned forearm trembled but held. Together they managed to get Beowulf halfway upright so that he could at least sit, his back propped against a stone.

The world tilted for a moment, then settled back into place. Everything hurt. It was as if his body had decided not to leave a single spot untouched.

"There," said Wulfgar. "Now at least you look like someone who can still give orders."

“Commands,” Beowulf repeated, spitting a small, red laugh into the dust. “What should I command? That the gods finally do a proper job?”

“At least you can order us to breathe a little longer,” Wulfgar said. “Otherwise, we’ll just stop out of habit.”

Wigstan looked at the two of them. It was a strange sight: the old king, half riddled with bullets, half burned; the old dog beside him, whose arm looked as if it had been cooked over an open flame; and himself, a man in half with a broken shoulder, who didn't know how to walk home, if "home" even existed anymore.

"I... I'm scared," he said suddenly, without meaning to. The words simply slipped out, sliding from burned lips into the air. "Not just now. There wasn't time. But now. Now I'm scared."

Wulfgar looked at him. "Good," he said. "That means you're alive."

“I don’t mean fear of the dragon,” Wigstan gasped. “It’s lying in there. It’s not doing anything anymore. I mean…” He searched for the image. “I mean the years that followed. When I wake up every night and think I’m still in there.”

Beowulf nodded slowly. "That's the real shit," he muttered. "The battle is short. The memories are long. The bards always tell only the short version."

He coughed again, and this time a long, dark thread came out of his mouth, lying like oil in the dust. He looked at it as if he were spitting out someone else.

"How long have I been?" he asked calmly, without pathos.

Wulfgar looked into his eyes. Then at the wound. He didn't need to look inside to know what it looked like. The fabric, the metal, everything was torn through, and underneath was this dark, mushy something that had no intention of healing.

"If you lie now," he thought, "you will destroy everything he is."

“Not long,” he said. “Not long enough to grow old. But long enough to see what you’ve done.”

“I was already old before I went into the cave,” said Beowulf. “Now I’m just honestly old.”

Wigstan swallowed. “We’re taking you back,” he said, and even as he said it, he knew how ridiculous it sounded. “Into the hall. With the people. That’s where you are to them…”

“I don’t owe them anything,” Beowulf interrupted, not angrily, just wearily. “I’ve given them enough. Blood. Bones. Nights spent awake while they snored. It’s the other way around. They owe me something.”

“What?” Wigstan asked.

"That they live on," Beowulf murmured. "That they till the fields again. That they spill the mead. That they bear children who have no idea what burnt flesh sounds like. That they tell the tale of what was here, but not as the bards would like it. Without the luster. With all the filth."

Wulfgar tilted his head. "They'll still make you shine," he said. "They can't help it. People are afraid of the truth. They cover it up with gold."

“Then at least let someone be there who knows the other version,” said Beowulf, looking at Wigstan. “You were in it. You know what it smells like.”

The young man nodded, slowly, as if swallowing a stone. "I won't forget this," he whispered. "I'll never forget this."

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "That is your curse. And your task."

The wind shifted slightly, bringing fresh air from somewhere where the land hadn't yet been completely burned. A thin, cool breeze brushed across their faces, mingling with the weight of smoke, blood, and weariness.

“I’m freezing,” Wigstan said in surprise. “Right in the middle of all this burnt mess. I’m freezing.”

"The body knows that something is coming to an end," Wulfgar said. "It slowly shuts down the furnaces to see how long the light will last."

Beowulf closed his eyes briefly. Not completely. Just to test how the darkness felt. It wasn't bad. Just full. Full of images, voices, blows, nights, women with names he couldn't all remember.

He opened it again. "Not yet," he murmured. "I still want to see what that hill over there looks like when the smoke clears."

At the bottom of the slope, Wigstan coughed again. Red. Heavy. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, saw the color, and grimaced.

"They always say men spit blood and keep going," he thought. "No one tells you how it feels when you know there's not much left in the tank."

You can't just cough up blood. It stays. In the lungs. In the stories. In the eyes of those who had to watch.

The dragon was dead. But the struggle over what his death meant had only just begun.

They sat there like leftover inventory after a brawl in a lousy pub: the bar was burned, the bottles broken, the band dead – and three guys who weren't sure if they were still customers or already ghosts.

The wind played with the ash that blew over from the hill. Sometimes a small cloud rose, pretending to be smoke again, as if something were still moving. But it was just dust that hadn't realized the show was over.

Wigstan tried again to straighten up. His body resisted, every muscle had its own opinion. His shoulder hurt so much that he briefly felt faint.

“Leave it,” said Wulfgar. “You look impressive even lying down. Impressively broken, anyway.”

“I just want to know if I can still stand,” Wigstan murmured.

"You can. Later. When someone sees it who still needs to be impressed."

Beowulf listened to them. The voices came from the side, slightly distorted, as if someone were forcing them through a wet sack. But he understood them. For now.

"You all talk too much," he muttered. "I ate half the dragon, I need some peace and quiet."

“The dragon ate you,” Wulfgar corrected. “You’re just too stubborn to be digested.”

Beowulf snorted, which turned directly into a cough. He reflexively bent forward as best he could, and this time it wasn't just blood. There was something slimy, dark, a mixture of red and black, that looked as if the night had been wrung out of him.

He paused for a moment, looking at the stain between his boots. The dirt was slowly sucking it away, but not fast enough. The stuff remained visible, gaining weight in the air.

"This isn't going to get any better," he said. Not a complaint, just an observation.

“No,” Wulfgar replied. “But you never had a reputation for getting better. Just tougher.”

"Stop sugarcoating it," growled Beowulf. "I don't want you spouting heroic pronouncements in my ears right before they close."

Wigstan watched as the blood disappeared into the dust. He thought about how, as a boy, he had poked around in the mud with a stick after pigs had been slaughtered. Meat, blood, dirt – eventually, it all looked the same.

“When I get home,” he said suddenly, “my mother will ask if it was bad. And I’ll be sitting there thinking: I watched someone who was my king bleed to death, and I spat red blood on the floor next to him like after drinking too much mead.”

“When you get home,” Wulfgar corrected. “First you have to make it down without breaking any more bones.”

Beowulf closed his eyes briefly. The world beyond his eyelids was red. Not just from blood. From everything. Fire, rage, mead, sunsets over fields now half-ash.

"I used to have a different idea of dying," he said quietly. "Somewhere in bed. Among furs. Maybe with a warm hand on mine. Not with a dragon's claw in my stomach and two half-broken idiots next to me."

"You could have found other friends," Wulfgar grumbled. "But you've always been bad at choosing."

"That's right," murmured Beowulf. "That's why you're still here."

The wind briefly picked up, catching in the crevices of their armor, drying sweat and blood into a sticky crust. Wigstan shuddered. Not from the cold. From the sensation of his body slowly trying to tighten whatever it still had.

He coughed again. This time it was less dramatic, but still red. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looking at the greasy trail on his glove.

"How long does one cough up blood before dying from it?" he asked the group, as if it were a normal question.

"It depends," said Wulfgar. "If you're young and your body thinks it still has something to do, it can take a long time. Years. If you're unlucky. If you're old and everything has seen too much..." He looked at Beowulf. "...then it can go quickly. Or it can still annoy you because you just can't finish."

"I don't have time for long," Beowulf murmured. "I've already used up too much. I don't want the little bit that's left to go by in installments."

Wigstan felt his throat tighten, and this time it wasn't from smoke. "I never wanted you to die," he blurted out. "I never really knew you—only from stories. And now I'm sitting next to you and…"

"…and you see that the stories forgot to mention how much everything stinks," Beowulf interrupted. "Believe me, boy, that's the most important part."

"I sent you in there," said Wigstan. "If I didn't…"

"Shut your mouth," Beowulf snapped at him. His voice was rough, but sharp. "You didn't invent him. The dragon was already there before you were born. Some idiot would have taken something sooner or later. If not you, then some other, dumber one. The mound was an invitation. The greed was there before you reached out. You're just the one who got it."

"But I…"

"You were the first to make a mistake," Beowulf said, cutting him off from trying to blame him. "Now you're one of those who set it right again. That's how it goes. We're always the sons of bitches in history, taking turns. Sometimes you break it, sometimes you try to fix it."

Wulfgar nodded. "If everyone who messed up immediately crawled into a corner to die, our hall would have been empty for years."

"You'll have to live with what happened," Beowulf added. "No matter how the bards spin it later. Sometimes they say you were the thief who set everything on fire. Sometimes the one who stood in the bastard's belly. They're all a little bit right. Make up your own verse."

Wigstan lowered his head. A drop of blood fell from his nose onto his breastplate. He watched it run down it. A thin, red thread.

"You don't just cough up blood," he thought. "You carry it with you. For years. In dreams. In coughs. In stories."

Further down, at the foot of the slope, something moved. Shadows, small, uncertain. Men. Those who had come along and were supposed to stay lower down. Those who hadn't gone into the cave.

"They're coming," Wulfgar murmured. "The stragglers. Or those who were clever enough not to crawl down the abyss, depending on how you want to look at it."

Wigstan felt a strange pang in his chest that had nothing to do with the dragon. A mixture of relief and bitter laughter.

"They'll be amazed," he said.

"They will count," said Beowulf. "Heads. Armor. Damage. And then they will begin to construct sentences they can take home."

The first ones reached the foot of the slope. There weren't many. Some of the older men who had stayed behind to hold the horses, a few of the boys Beowulf had sent back before things got serious. Herebald was among them, the one who had "footache" before the mountain began to break apart. His armor was cleaner, his eyes wider.

When they saw the three, they stopped short. Most remained standing, as if they had reached an invisible trench. A few slowly continued the final steps, cautiously, as if approaching a camp where it was impossible to know who was already dead and who was merely sleeping.

“Lord,” someone cried, his voice almost breaking. “Lord… Beowulf…”

"Don't shout," Beowulf murmured. "My head is full enough."

Herebald stood at a respectful distance, as if he wished he could sink into the ground. He looked like a dog who knew perfectly well that he had run away when things got dangerous and was now returning to his master.

“You… you have the dragon…?”

“Dead,” Wulfgar said tersely. “The mountain is over it, the belly is open, the rest stinks. If you want to look, do it quickly before the cave decides to bury you too.”

A murmur went through the small group. A few looked up at the crevice, but no one took a step in that direction.

"And the others?" one asked quietly.

Wigstan laughed briefly, hoarsely. It sounded as if he were shaking sand from his lungs. "Which others?"

Silence.

“We are the only ones left,” said Wulfgar, nodding towards himself, Wigstan, and Beowulf. “The rest are either inside or have turned to torch-meat along the way. Don’t count them. You won’t like the number.”

Herebald swallowed. He looked at Wigstan, then Beowulf. Guilt crept into his face.

“I… I went back,” he said. “I…”

“Yes,” Beowulf interrupted. “You’re back. Congratulations. You’re alive. Wear something with that.”

Herebald opened his mouth, then closed it again. No excuse, no confession. Just the naked, ugly knowledge that his body had made the right decision—and that it would still destroy him.

“Listen,” said Beowulf, and his voice briefly regained that old weight it used to have when he stood up in a packed hall. “The story you tell later is up to you. But there’s one thing you can’t leave out: He”—he nodded to Wigstan—“was inside. He opened the belly from the inside. Wulfgar pulled him out again. The dragon is dead. The rest,” he waved vaguely at the sky, “is decoration.”

Wigstan wanted to protest, to say that he had merely stumbled, fallen, been pulled in. That none of it had been heroic. But the words stuck. Perhaps because he knew that's how it would go: The world needs simple sentences. "He was in, the dragon died." End of story.

"And what about you, sir?" one of the men asked hesitantly.

Beowulf looked at the wound in his side. The metal had been bent open like sheet metal, revealing a black, red, shiny crack beneath. Each breath produced a soft, damp sound.

"I won't be dancing my way home anymore," he said. "If I come back, I'll be carried. And if you're smart, you'll save yourselves the trouble and just build me a proper pyre."

Wigstan coughed and spat out blood again. It ran down the slope like a thin thread.

"You can't just cough up blood," Wulfgar muttered, more to himself than to the others. "It always comes with you. Right to the end."

The men downstairs remained silent. None of them had a witty remark ready. This was bigger than their usual, shallow sentences.

Above them stood the hill, which now had no dragon – only a pile of fallen stones, charred gold, and a cave that was slowly becoming a scar.

Three men were squatting below, all coughing up blood, each in his own way.

And somewhere in between, quietly in the background, the machine of stories began to run, which wanted to make something doable out of death and something singable out of stench.

Beowulf hadn't heard them yet. He only heard his own rattling. And he knew: no one could ever get that out of him.

For a while, absolutely nothing happened. Or rather: everything was happening, but no one had the strength to comment on it. The wind tugged at the hillside. The ash settled. The hill continued to steam like an old drunkard still gurgling and retching in his sleep.

Beowulf sat half-slumped, his shoulders against the stone, his gaze fixed on what had once been his land, now resembling a badly shaven face: patches of hair here, bald spots there, cuts in between. Behind the charred hides of the fields, the distant line of the coastline peeked out

somewhere, thin and indifferent. The world back there hadn't seen a dragon. It would continue sending waves crashing onto the shore no matter who up here was spewing blood into the dust.

“We should take you down,” one of the men at the foot of the slope finally said, cautiously, as if addressing a drunkard still holding a knife. “Into the hall. To the healers. Maybe…”

“Healers,” Beowulf repeated tonelessly. “They can put herbs on my wound, yes? A little salve, some warm cloths. Perhaps a little song. And then? Then I lie in my hall and die more slowly. Is that what you call healing?”

The man fell silent and took a half step back.

Wulfgar's lips curled into a crooked expression. "He's just saying: Yes. Bring him down. But don't expect miracles."

“I mean,” growled Beowulf, “that you should stop pretending that death is a disease that can be boiled away with herbs. The dragon has already written the note inside my belly. The most you can do is make sure that the writing doesn't spread everywhere.”

Wigstan laughed hoarsely. It sounded more like a humorous cough. "Still better to die on some plank of wood than here in the dust," he said. "No one can even burn you properly here."

Beowulf thought about it briefly. About planks, torches, the smell of burning meat that already sickened him. About the hall where he had wandered around for years like a house dog wearing a crown.

"Good," he muttered. "Take me down. If I'm going to die anyway, I at least want to know that I've managed to go downhill from a hill once in my life, and not just uphill all the time."

Wulfgar nodded. "You heard it," he called to the men. "Build a stretcher. Anything long and reasonably sturdy. Shields, spears, planks, bones from your lies—I don't care. The main thing is that it doesn't break at the first step."

The men began to move. Not quickly, not hastily. Cautiously, cautiously, as if afraid that any wrong move could transform what was happening into something else. They searched for wood in a burned landscape, finding remains of wagons, beams that the dragon hadn't completely turned to charcoal. Shields whose owners now lay somewhere in the cave.

Herebald carried two shields joined together, as if they were the planks of his own guilty conscience. He said nothing, but his face was an open book: fear, shame, relief that he was alive, and the nauseating knowledge that others had died for him.

"Don't look at me like that," Wulfgar muttered as he passed him to help. "He wasn't hit just because of you. He's spent his whole life getting involved in this kind of thing."

"I should have stayed," Herebald whispered.

“Perhaps,” said Wulfgar. “Perhaps not. Perhaps you would just be one more person in the cave, now stuck to a wall as a decorative torch. You are here. So make something of ‘here’.”

Wigstan observed the improvisation with that half-hearted, feverish look that people have who have lost too much blood and haven't yet realized that they're already running over time.

“You see,” he thought, “that’s how you build a story: You put shields together, tie them together with straps, put an old man on them and call it the way back.”

When the stretcher was ready – two longitudinal beams, four shields, lashed together with belt straps and spear lines – they suddenly stood there like a small procession still waiting for the dead man. Except that the dead man was still talking.

"Lift me carefully," warned Beowulf. "Otherwise, my belly will realize it's open and decide to throw the rest right after it."

They lifted him. It was a clumsy, heavy, awkward act. Two men at the ends, two on the sides, Wulfgar supporting him, Wigstan doing his best somewhere nearby, ready to go and yet completely exhausted. Beowulf groaned as they pried him from the stone. It felt as if someone were ripping his insides out from top to bottom.

"Take it easy," Wulfgar growled. "One more peep and you'll really be nothing but baggage."

“All my life I’ve been someone’s baggage,” Beowulf gasped. “At least now I’m heavy.”

They set off. Slowly, carefully, down the slope. The ground was crumbly, full of ash and loose stones. Every step was a small risk. Once, one of the porters slipped, the stretcher tipped over, only a jerk from the others kept it on the slope. Beowulf gritted his teeth, the pain shooting up to his eyes.

“If you let me down,” he gasped, “I will find a way to haunt you from the grave.”

"That wouldn't surprise me," said Wulfgar.

Wigstan hobbled alongside, one hand on the stretcher strap, not because he was strong, but because he needed to be. His right arm hung uselessly, each step sending small explosions through his shoulder. He coughed intermittently, short and dry, then wet again. And each time the redness rose, he thought: "This is here to stay. This is part of me now."

The further they moved away from the slope, the fainter the creaking of the rock behind them became. The hill receded into the distance, like a fat, black back blocking their view. If seen from afar, one would have had no idea what lay within: a dead dragon, collapsed rock, a rotting treasure, and the remains of men who had tried to harvest anything other than grain.

“We should make a statement,” said one of the men who had remained silent until then. “A stone, a stake… anything. So that people know that here…”

“…that a dragon lay here,” Wulfgar interrupted. “Yes. We’ll do that. Later. When we’re not busy getting our king down the slope in one piece.”

"And so that the next idiot knows to keep his hands off the hill," Beowulf added. "Even though no one will. Greed learns nothing. It just goes by other names."

They finally reached flatter ground. Here the damage looked different. No longer the stark, charred horror. More like burned edges, charred hedges, trees with half their crowns, fields scarred by brown. The smoke was thinner, the air easier to bear. But the smell remained.

“When I lie in the hall later,” thought Wigstan, “it will be in my clothes, in my hair, in my skin. I can bathe until I die – the dragon will stay inside.”

They stopped at a small, burnt tree stump that cast enough shade to give the impression of offering shelter. The porters carefully set the stretcher down. Wulfgar straightened his back, which creaked like wood in the frost.

"A short break," he said. "Before everything falls apart."

Beowulf stared upwards. A few crows circled overhead, curious but still cautious. They smelled that something was dying, but they knew the difference between fresh and premature.

"The sky is ugly today," he muttered.

“He didn’t prepare,” Wigstan replied. “No one told him that a dragon and a king would die today.”

"The king isn't dead yet," growled Beowulf. "The king is working on it."

Wulfgar sat down beside the stretcher, lifted the burned forearm slightly, and examined it. The skin was swollen, discolored, and some areas looked as if they had tried to liquefy.

“We need herbs,” said one of the men. “Ointments. Bandages. In the hall…”

“In the hall they have ointment for scrapes, thread for simple cuts, and prayers for headaches,” Wulfgar interrupted. “What we need is something else. Pain so great that you just want to leave God alone.”

“They’ll cook something,” Wigstan said. “For him. For us. Something to numb the pain. Something to clear the mind a little.”

Beowulf heard the word "numb" and felt something inside him simultaneously agree and resist it.

"Pain is the only thing telling me I'm still here," he thought. "If they take it away, what's left? A body that realizes it's running on empty."

He coughed again. This time there was less. Thinner, lighter cough. Perhaps he simply didn't have as much left.

"You can't just cough up blood," he said quietly. "But eventually you cough up everything you have. What remains is..."

“…peace and quiet,” Wulfgar added.

“…Emptiness,” thought Wigstan.

“…stories,” some bard would later say, when he crafted a new verse in which everything sounded more heroic than here at the tree stump.

One of the men rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a small bag of dried herbs. "For pain," he murmured. "Usually for broken fingers or bad nights. You can chew it or boil it."

Wulfgar took the bag and sniffed. A sharp, bitter smell, somewhere between earth and a forgotten mead-making site.

"Give us something," he said. "If he keeps coughing much longer, he'll eventually suffocate us with the sound."

Beowulf raised an eyebrow. "You're seriously going to stuff me full of herbs?"

"I want you to stay with us long enough to see yourself burned," Wulfgar growled. "Everything else is a bonus."

"Then make something to drink out of the herbs," Beowulf muttered. "If I'm going to swallow something, at least pretend it's not medicine. I've taken things from cups all my life. Why should that stop now?"

They laughed briefly, bitterly. Humor was the last tool they had left, and they used it as if they were hammering nails with beer bottles.

One of the men set off for the nearby stream, which still flowed merrily along the edge of the burned area, as if nothing had happened. He wanted to fetch water to make a broth in which the herbs could do their work.

“Between pain and numbness,” thought Wigstan, “lies a thin path. We will walk on it for the next few days. Maybe weeks. Some in the hall with potions and prayers, others out in the field, coughing and having bad dreams.”

Beowulf closed his eyes again. He heard the men talking, walking, fetching water, gathering wood. He heard the wind, the soft crackling of charred branches, the distant call of a bird that didn't know what had happened.

And amidst all this, he heard his own rattling. No longer the dragon's. His own.

You don't just cough up blood. You accompany it. You listen as it leaves your body. And eventually, when nothing more comes, only silence remains.

She wasn't there yet. The pain that held him captive was still there.

And somewhere, far away, the hall was already waiting – with its benches, its furs, its mead jugs, its medicinal herbs and its half-forged prayers.

The next steps would lead there. Between painkillers and prayers, he thought, it would be decided how a king is allowed to die.

CHAPTER 29 – Between Painkillers and Prayers

They brought him back like a half-broken piece of furniture, too valuable to simply leave by the roadside. The stretcher creaked with every step, the straps groaned, the men cursed softly as the ground slipped. One stumbled in the dirt, regained his balance, and Beowulf bumped his side against the wooden slat, briefly seeing stars—not the beautiful kind, but the kind that make you sick.

The road to Heorot was the same as always, but now it looked as if it had been laid out by a bad dream. Fields half burned, half alive. Fences of which only black stumps remained. A few cows that looked as if they knew they were still in the world, but wondered why.

Wigstan hobbled beside the stretcher, his broken arm pressed against his body as if trying to prevent it from falling off and being left lying somewhere. He felt as if he were made of countless pieces, held together only by habit. Each breath brought that suspicious tickling deep in his chest, which slowly formed into a small, malevolent voice: "I'm here. I'm staying."

Wulfgar walked on the other side, carrying his burned forearm like a foreign object. His mind was quieter than it should have been. No triumph, no lingering heroism. More like a sober inventory: dragon dead, king half-dead, boy half-broken, the rest scattered. The balance sheet of an evening no one had planned for.

“I smell like a barbecue from every crevice,” Beowulf muttered after a while. His voice had softened, but still had that worn tone, more street than throne room. “When I lie in the hall, everyone gets hungry.”

"They're more likely to get scared in the hall," said Wulfgar. "They thought dragons were just stories. Now one of them is smelling their furs through you."

"Good," growled Beowulf. "Maybe then they'll finally stop crying out for gods over every little thing and realize that the monsters out here don't live in songs."

The hall appeared before them, first as a shadow against the landscape, then as a smoke-blackened, battered queen. The roof had survived the past few days, albeit scarred. In some places, the repairs were visible: new beams, makeshift patches, stains of fresh pitch. Heorot looked like a boxer after the tenth round—battered, but still in the ring.

As they approached, a crowd of people emerged from the shadows of the house. Women, old people, a few children who had learned too early how to be quiet. A few of the men who hadn't ridden up the hill stood further back, their hands clenched into fists, as if they could thus retrospectively become part of the story.

The first cries came when they saw him lying on the stretcher. Not a hero's sigh, but rather a deep, half-suppressed groan that rippled through the ranks like a gust of wind.

“He’s alive!” shouted one of the porters. “He… he’s still breathing.”

"Not yet," thought Beowulf. "That little shitty word is now stuck to everything."

They carried him through the entrance, under the carved row of beams depicting scenes in which he himself had once been portrayed as a radiant figure. The wood grinned at him with old, exaggerated faces, and he saw how far the path was from those carved lies to what lay on the stretcher.

Inside, the air was thicker, but not with smoke. With people. With the smell of fear, sweat, old mead, wet fur, and that bitter something that creeps into every hall where too much crying has taken place: resignation. The fire in the center burned, but smaller than usual, as if even the fire had respect.

They laid him on a wide bench near the fire. Not on his hunting stand. Not on the throne. On wood where men usually lay when they were too drunk to find their way to their own mats.

"Here," said Wulfgar. "At least here he can die in a warm place."

A few healers—women with scarred hands, red eyes, and that mixture of sobriety and weariness that comes only from witnessing too many deaths—approached cautiously. One held a pot of hot water, another carried a bag of herbs, and a third held linen bandages.

“Take off his armor,” one of them said, without much preamble. “Otherwise we’ll only see the metal and not what’s underneath.”

“Nobody wants to see what’s underneath,” Beowulf muttered. “Not even me. And it’s mine.”

"It belongs to us as long as we're still trying to patch it up," the woman retorted. "So shut up for a moment, King."

Wulfgar grinned crookedly. "I like her," he said quietly.

They set to work on the armor. Straps were loosened, buckles opened, metal plates carefully lifted. Every inch that peeled away from the skin sounded like a plaster being pulled off flesh that never had a chance to heal. The healers worked quickly, but not frantically. It was clear: for them, this wasn't the first time they had stripped a man of his iron armor to see what the war had truly cost.

When the breastplate was removed, one of the women briefly closed her eyes. Not in disgust. But in response to that instinctive reflex you get when you see something you know will require more work than you have the strength for.

The wound in his side was a nasty, dark gash. The flesh around it was swollen, discolored, burned; something still glowed in the deeper layers. As if the dragon's bite had created a small, private hell inside.

"It burns from the inside," murmured a healer. "It's not just a cut. There's..."

"Dragon's Mouth," said Wulfgar. "Fire, poison, whatever. Call it what you like. Just know it won't be cured with a cup of herbal tea."

The woman with the herbal pouch stepped closer. "We can ease the pain. A little. Clear his head. Or not, depending on what he wants."

"A clear head is overrated," muttered Beowulf. "I've spent decades getting into trouble with a clear head. Maybe it's time the tables were turned."

Wigstan sat down on a nearby bench, his shoulder haphazardly strapped down. Someone else approached him, trying to examine the injury, but he waved them off. "Later," he said. "He'll be the first."

"You know your place," Wulfgar growled. "A good start for someone they'll all be staring at later."

The healers mixed herbs into the hot water, stirring until a bitter aroma spread, cutting through the stench of mead. One brought a cup to Beowulf's mouth. He held it up, smelled it, and snorted.

"It smells like spoiled tea," he said.

“It is,” the woman replied. “Tea, which soothes the corrupting things in a person. Drink it. Or you’ll scream the place down when we try to bandage you.”

"Half of my men have never heard me complain," he muttered.

"Then they will experience today that you too are just meat."

He took a sip. It tasted like someone had boiled dirt, sweat, and old wood in water. He grimaced, then continued drinking.

"Is this your kind of painkiller?" he asked.

"Call it what you like," the woman replied. "It slows down your mind and dulls the pain. It doesn't heal you. But it makes it easier to lie when someone tells you everything will be alright."

He laughed again, briefly. "Good. Then give me enough to lie myself to death."

They let him drink, in small sips. The pitcher moved back and forth between his lips and the healer's hand. After a while, he noticed that the edges of the pain were softening. They didn't disappear, but they were beginning to feel like something you could push into the background with effort.

The hall filled up. The first songs were sung, tentatively. No powerful, clear heroic hymns. More like half-hearted attempts to find something that would unite them. Some prayed. Not aloud. Silently. To gods who were far too distant to smell the stench.

"They are tinkering with their faith," thought Beowulf. "Like an old weapon, whose edge no one knows anymore."

An old woman sat down next to Wigstan and began to look at his shoulder. "The arm's ruined," she said matter-of-factly. "We'll get it back on, but it will remind you, in all kinds of weather."

“I’ll have enough memories anyway,” Wigstan murmured.

“Not like that,” she said. “The body forgets less than the mind. You’ll know when rain is coming. And when the night smells anything like this cave, your fingers will itch. That’s the price you pay for still being here.”

He nodded. He knew she was right. There was that faint tug in his chest, that early cough, which was more than just lingering smoke.

"You can't just cough up blood," he thought. "It finds its way into places. It dissolves and becomes firmly embedded within you."

They added more logs to the fire. Sparks rose as if they wanted to take the place of the dragon's flame without competition, now that the grand stage was clear.

Wulfgar sat beside the bench where Beowulf lay and watched the healers work. They cleaned the wound as best they could, flushed out what wanted to come out, applied a herbal poultice to lessen the burning, and bandaged everything with linen, which immediately soaked up red stains.

“Will he…?” began one of the young warriors nearby.

“Yes,” Wulfgar interrupted. “He’s going to die. That’s not the question. The only question is: How much longer will he annoy us before he does?”

A few laughed strainedly. One swallowed hard.

Beowulf heard every word. The herbs clouded his senses, but not so much that he missed the irony.

“Between painkillers and prayers,” he thought, “there’s a fine line. On the one hand, your body is playing tricks on you, on the other, your faith.”

He was tired. Dead tired. But not dead yet. And that was the problem.

Night would come, with its flickering shadows on the walls, its songs unsure whether to sing of sorrow or triumph. And somewhere in between lay he, an old bastard with a hole in his side, finally realizing that one can die alone even at a crowded table.

But his day wasn't over yet. Words still needed to be spoken, words that would later grow in other mouths. And someone on the bench knew that the gods, should they be listening, were just as overwhelmed as everyone else in that smoky hall.

The herbs crept slowly into his brain like drunken ants. There was no clean break between pain and numbness; more of a dirty smear. The edges softened, but in the middle, the pain still lingered like a fat dog refusing to leave your belly. Beowulf felt his thoughts begin to unravel. Not fly away. Just lose their order.

The hall breathed heavily. Every movement was absorbed by the beams, the furs, the eyes fixed on him. People pretended to be checking to see if he was unwell. In truth, they wanted to see a hero crumble. You don't get to see that very often.

An old priest—not one of those radiant, upright types, but one with a belly that had seen too much sacrificial meat and a beard that knew more stains than the tabletops—approached. In his hand he held a carved staff that might once have been impressive, but now looked like a club used to drive aside drunken pigs.

“My king,” he began, in the voice of a man who had memorized too many formal phrases, “the gods…”

“…missed the day,” Beowulf cut him off. “Or didn’t they see the flames? Did they have more important appointments? A chicken-sacrificing conference?”

A few in the hall held their breath. This wasn't how one spoke to the gods. At least not if one still had plans.

The priest didn't flinch. He had seen enough blood to know that theory and practice rarely went hand in hand. "The gods are with you, Beowulf," he said.

“The gods are involved in everything,” Beowulf murmured. “It’s a good trick. When it all happens, you can always say they were there. Where were they when the dragon burned the fields? In the loo? By the mead barrel?”

“Sometimes they test us,” the priest tried.

“They test us like a butcher tests a pig to see if the knife is sharp,” Beowulf growled. “And if we fail, they say it was fate.”

The priest raised his staff slightly, as if to begin a ritual that would explain to everyone why this made sense. Beowulf grasped his wrist. It was weak, but his fingers still held enough of their old defiance.

“Spare me the platitudes,” he said. “I’ve watched men die all my life. None of them died any easier because someone was muttering beside them. The prayers are for those who remain. For those who lie awake at night trying to convince themselves that it was all part of a plan.”

The priest looked at him. For a moment, there was no office, no role. Just a tired man who knew that his words were mostly just for show. "Then what do you want, King?" he asked more quietly.

Beowulf pondered. Or tried to. The herbs turned his thoughts into small, flickering lights.

"Will?" He gave a short, dry laugh. "I want a sip of mead that doesn't taste like medicine. I want someone to tell me how many men actually came back without lying to my face. And I want you to stop pretending that my dying will make anyone's future any easier."

Wulfgar stood beside him, listening to every word. He looked at the priest. "You heard him," he said. "Mead, numbers, less drama."

The priest lowered his staff slightly. “The mead…”

“…come,” one of the women interjected, already on her way to the barrel before anyone could give a moral speech.

The numbers, thought Wulfgar. Everyone shied away from them. If you speak them out loud, you lay the truth bare, and most people prefer it clothed.

“How many?” asked Beowulf, as if he had heard Wulfgar’s thoughts.

Wulfgar sighed. "Of those who climbed the slope with you? Fewer than we needed. More than we deserved."

“A number, Wulfgar,” Beowulf pressed. “Not a philosophy.”

Wulfgar rubbed his face with his good hand. "Of those who were in the cave..." he began, letting the sentence hang, searching his mind, pulling out images. "We were, what... twenty, twenty-two, who went in. Outside now are you, me, Wigstan. And maybe... one more, who turned back too soon and ran too late."

Wigstan blinked. He saw the faces before him. Those who had screamed, those who had simply collapsed. Those who had run backward because their bodies had decided that survival was worth more than stories.

“The rest,” said Wulfgar, “remained in the bastard’s belly. Or under his gold. Or under the rock that crashed down. Count them if you like. I’d rather not give you a number. Otherwise, you’ll spend the next few years repeating it in every story as if it were a magic formula.”

Beowulf nodded slowly. His eyes grew heavy. The herbs were working. His body longed to finally move away from the center of attention.

The woman with the mead brought a cup. The smell was more familiar: sweet, sour, with that warm heaviness that makes men first strong and then stupid. She held it out to him, and Wulfgar helped him lift his head.

"This is the last decent mead you'll get," said Wulfgar. "Enjoy it or spill it, it's all the same to me."

Beowulf took a sip. The mead mingled with the bitter aftertaste of the herbs. It was as if someone were sprinkling sugar on a wound.

"It tastes good," he murmured. "Like something that doesn't apologize."

Around them, a murmuring chorus of half-finished prayers began. Some knelt, others stood, a few tried to start a song but didn't get past the first verse. The word "thank you" was uttered frequently. Thank you for the victory. Thank you that the dragon was dead. Thank you that they were still there.

Beowulf heard the "thank you" and had to laugh, even though it hurt.

“They thank the gods,” he said to Wulfgar. “Not you. Not Wigstan. Not the twenty who lie in the belly.”

“That’s how they are,” said Wulfgar. “If something goes wrong, it was our fault. If something goes right, it was the gods’ fault. It’s a convenient system.”

"Should I be offended?"

“If you start to get offended now, you’ve chosen the wrong time in your life to do it,” Wulfgar said.

Wigstan heard the word "thank you" and felt a shudder inside him. He thought of the inside. The feeling of standing in the wound. The sound of the sword piercing something warm. The stench that still clung to his hair.

"Thank you," he thought. "For what exactly? For making me scream at night when I think the thing is still breathing? For making my laughter always sound a little thin from now on?"

The priest approached again, now quieter, somewhat more honest. "It is customary," he said, "to pray for a falling king. For a path that becomes easier."

"The road won't get any easier," murmured Beowulf. "It will only get shorter."

“Nevertheless, I will pray,” said the priest. “Not for you. For those who remain. So that they have a word to cling to when they still hear the roaring at night.”

Beowulf looked at him, and for the first time, there was a hint of respect. "Then speak," he said. "But don't make it too pleasant. I don't want them to think this is a happy ending."

The priest knelt, leaning heavily on his staff, and began to murmur. No grand, sweeping words. They were simple sentences, almost raw. He spoke of a man who had fought his whole life against things bigger than himself. Of guilt that cannot be entirely washed away. Of a land that had seen too much fire.

Wulfgar wasn't so much listening to the content. He was listening to the voices around her, clinging to the words like thirsty dogs to a trough. For her, it was important. To him, it sounded like background music, the kind you turn up when you don't want to hear someone breathing heavily.

Beowulf felt something inside him relax. Not just muscle tension. Something deeper. As if a hand were slowly loosening its grip on his chest. The herbs did the rest; the mead cast a warm film over everything.

He raised his head one last little bit, seeking Wigstan's gaze.

“You,” he said, his voice shaky but clear enough. “Listen. When they start drooling over heroes, dragons, and gods later on—you tell them what it was like. That the dragon stank like shit. That men ran. That you were scared. That I spat blood like an old dog. Understand?”

Wigstan swallowed. "Yes," he whispered. "But they won't want to hear it."

"Then say it more quietly," murmured Beowulf. "Some truths are not for the fire, but for the darkness between two breaths."

He lowered his head again. The priest continued muttering. Someone cried. Someone laughed hysterically. Someone prayed to the wrong name, simply out of reflex.

Between painkillers and prayers lay an old man with a hole in his side, who understood that everything that remained of him would take place in other people's minds – and that he no longer had any control over whether the images would be clean or dirty.

The herbs pushed the world away a little. The pain became duller. The voices blurred.

Beowulf inhaled. Exhaled. Once more. Again.

He was still there.

The night would decide how much longer.

Night crept into Heorot like a dog that knows it's about to stumble into a fight. It didn't come quietly. It brought wind that rattled the rafters and shadows that crept up the walls like uninvited memories. The fire in the center of the hall struggled upward, sending flickering tongues of flame to the ceiling, as if trying to repaint the old, black patina.

Beowulf lay on the bench, half on his side so the wound wouldn't press so loudly against the bandage. The herbs had softened his mind, but not enough to make him forget where he was. Every breath was a struggle: in, out, hoping nothing was stuck.

Around him, the hall was filled with sounds rubbing against each other: whispers, soft weeping, the creaking of wood, the dull thud of a cup being slammed down on the table. The air was heavy with mead, smoke, and that acrid smell of fear sweat that you just can't get rid of.

Wigstan sat not far away, his back against a pillar. His shoulder was in a rough splint, a wooden brace covered with linen. It pulled with every movement; the fingers of his right hand were still there, but they felt as if they had belonged to someone else. The healer had given him herbs too, different, weaker ones. Just enough to soften the pain, not enough to make it disappear.

He coughed. It was a small cough, more of a test than an attack. Nevertheless, a thin tinge of redness came with it. He wiped it away with his hand, discreetly, but Wulfgar had seen it.

"Get used to it," Wulfgar grumbled from the edge of the bench where he sat, his burned arm resting on his knees. "It'll stay with you. Maybe for your whole damned life. You'll wonder if you left anything of him inside you back then. A shadow, a wisp of smoke. Maybe you did. Maybe he just breathed on you from close range."

“Can one… can one die from it?” Wigstan asked.

Wulfgar shrugged. "You can die of anything. Even from a thought, if you hold onto it long enough. The question isn't what you die of. The question is what you do until then."

A few of the men had started singing. Tentatively at first, then more loudly, but never really cleanly. Their voices slipped, faltered, and went off-key. No one was in the mood for those straight, bright melodies they usually sang when meat and mead were plentiful. Today they sounded like men trying to bury a dragon with a children's song.

“Beowulf, son of…” one of them began, pathetically, a practice from olden times.

"Forget the family tree," growled Beowulf, without opening his eyes. "Nobody gives a damn about it here. Sing if you must, but don't lie about names."

The singer fell silent, cleared his throat, and began singing a different note. No grand words. Just a sloppy, almost defiantly rattled-off verse about a man, a hill, a cow, lots of fire, and too little of what remained afterward. It wasn't a good song. But it was honest enough to make the room quiet for a moment.

"That's better," murmured Beowulf.

The healers came and went. They checked the bandages, changed cloths that had become saturated. Once, one of them carefully lifted the fabric, and a gush of dark liquid ran out. She pressed fresh herbs onto it, murmuring nothing about "it'll be alright"—only a quiet "it stings less when it can come out."

Beowulf saw the women out of the corner of his eye. Hands that had moved when men went to war and when they returned, whole or in pieces. Hands that had seen more blood than many a warrior.

"You're the only ones who really know all this shit," he muttered.

The older of them, with the gray streaks in her hair, glanced briefly at him. "We only see the remnants," she said. "We don't see the battle. We're paying the price."

"Receipts are more honest than stories," said Beowulf.

Wulfgar sat closer to him, so that his silhouette became a dark, slanted shadow in the firelight beside him. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

Beowulf pondered. It would have been easy to say, "Like a hero." Or, "Like a dying man." But both were wrong. He felt like someone sitting on a downward-leading staircase, undecided whether to take the next steps or simply remain seated.

“Light,” he finally said. “Strange, isn’t it? As if someone had cut half of me out of the side. I’m heavy on the outside, but on the inside… light.”

"That's the blood that's gone," Wulfgar said. "You're getting thinner. And all you're carrying is the years."

"The years are heavier than blood," murmured Beowulf. "But you can't spit them out."

The priest, who hadn't left his post by the fire, continued to speak softly, his words hanging in the air like smoke. Some listened, others only pretended. Wigstan only half listened. He caught fragments: "Way," "Glory," "Peace," "Gods." A few slipped off him like water off a greasy wall. One word stuck: "Forgiveness."

He pressed his lips together.

"Whom are you forgiving here?" he thought. "The dragon? You? Him?" He looked at Beowulf. "Or the gods, for their absence?"

Wigstan coughed again, harder, this time with a jerk that set his shoulder on fire once more. A thicker blob of red blood rose up, landing on the straw-strewn steppe beneath him. He stared at it as if it were a strange animal.

Beowulf heard the coughing, even though the hall was noisy. "Boy," he said without looking, "you'll get used to it. Each of us carries our own little piece of dragon within us. Your lungs, my belly, Wulfgar's arm, the heads of those over there."

“I don’t want any of that thing inside me,” Wigstan said.

"Too late," Wulfgar muttered. "It's like with stories. Once you're in, you can't really get out."

The hall slowly emptied around the circle of fire. Some left because they couldn't bear to see the king like that. Others stayed because they couldn't bear not to see him. Some simply fell asleep where they sat, from exhaustion, from despair, from the dull weariness after days that had demanded too much of them.

A few children were led out by women who whispered in their ears that they needed to sleep because tomorrow would be a new day and they would need strength for it. The children glanced back, wide eyes that saw more than they cared to: the blood, the bandages, the old man who no longer looked like the man in the stories.

"They'll say later that they were there," thought Beowulf. "They won't remember the smell, only the image. Perhaps that's a good thing. The stench is ours."

The mead continued to be passed around. This time not as an invitation to forgetfulness, as usual, but like a kind of primitive medicine: drink it so you don't have to examine every single thought individually. Wigstan refused the second cup. His stomach rebelled at the thought of choking down something heavy again.

“If I drink more now,” he thought, “I’ll just throw it up again. And that’s a kind of sacrifice nobody needs.”

Once a healer came and laid her hand on his chest, listening to his breathing. She frowned, not dramatically, just knowingly. "You will cough," she said. "Today, tomorrow, in a year. What's important is that in the days in between you don't forget why."

"Why?" he asked.

“Because you lived where others stayed,” she said. “That’s not a gift. That’s a responsibility. And sometimes a punishment.”

Beowulf drifted. The herbs had pushed him into a liminal space where images came and went like drunken guests. He saw Grendel, with that misshapen, drooling body. He saw his mother emerging from the lake, slimy, furious. He saw the dragon, the hill, the firelight. Everything blurred together. A part of him laughed: "Always the same shit, just different teeth."

In between, another image appeared. A younger Beowulf, not yet a king, just a cocky bastard with too much strength in his arms and too little brains in his head. He stood in a strange hall, roaring that he would slay monsters, and believed every word. The young man looked at the old man. The old man looked at the young man. No gods between them.

"Was it worth it?" asked the young man.

"Depends on who you ask," the old man muttered. "Me? Or those who starved to death at my table while I was on the other side of the world tearing someone's head off?"

"You have become a hero," said the young man.

“I’ve grown old,” replied the old man. “Those are two different things.”

He jumped up briefly. Someone had placed their hand on his shoulder. It was Wulfgar.

"Still there?" he asked.

Beowulf grinned crookedly. "More or less," he said. "Less more."

"If you leave..." Wulfgar paused, cleared his throat, searching for a sentence that didn't sound like a bard's. "If you leave, I don't want any gods near me. Only humans who know what you smelled like."

"Then stay here," muttered Beowulf. "You reek of dragon enough yourself, that's enough for a whole procession."

They both laughed, briefly and dryly. It hurt. It was the best laugh in days.

Later, much later, when the fire had died down and the shadows in the corners deepened, the hall grew quieter. The voices became less frequent, the murmuring fainter. The prayers continued tentatively, becoming shorter, more weary.

Wigstan nodded off and then jolted awake again, each time with the feeling of still being inside the dragon's belly. Once he thought he heard the roaring again, that in-and-out sound that made the rock tremble. Then he realized it was Beowulf's breathing. Uneven, but still there.

"Do you hear?" Wulfgar asked softly. "He's still fighting. Not against dragons. This time against his own flesh."

“Can we help him?” Wigstan asked.

“Yes,” said Wulfgar. “You can stay there.”

They stayed. Both of them. Wulfgar on the edge of the bench, Wigstan with his back against the pillar, his eyes half-open, half-closed. Outside, the wind howled as if announcing the final round.

Between painkillers and prayers, the night lay like a dirty cloth. Beneath it, a dying king, a scarred friend, a young man with blood in his lungs.

And somewhere behind the beams, in the wood, in the furs, the stories began to take shape – crooked, askew, with omitted parts.

Morning would come. Whether Beowulf would still be alive to see it was another question.

CHAPTER 30 – The hero miscalculates with eternity

Morning came without asking if anyone was up for another day. No radiant sunrise, no golden promise. Just a pale, wan light that pushed through the cracks in the roof, revealing the dust motes hanging in the air. The night wasn't over; it had merely changed color.

Beowulf realized the hall had changed before he even fully opened his eyes. The sounds were different. The murmuring was less frequent, the crackling of the fire drier, the prayers rarer. He felt the day approaching like someone who wakes from a kick in the ribs, even though no one touches him.

He tried to open his eyes. His left one opened halfway, his right one protested as if it had decided to give up in the night. He saw the blurry outlines of dark beams, smoke, flickering light. And above them – small patches of pale gray where the sky pushed through the cracks.

"Well?" grumbled a voice beside him. "Have you been to eternity and back again, or are you still stuck here between the bench and the floorboards?"

Wulfgar. Of course. He was still sitting in the same spot, on the edge of the bench, as if he'd been glued there. His eyes were red, the wrinkles deeper, but he was there. His burned forearm lay like an ugly relic on his knee.

"Are you still there?" croaked Beowulf. His voice sounded as if it had been dragged through gravel.

"I won't leave until you're gone," said Wulfgar. "And I might even stay then to see if you're really gone or just pretending."

Beowulf tried to give a short, sharp cough. It was a half-cough. A thin thread of reddish-brown phlegm trickled past his lips. It tasted stale.

"What time is it?" he asked. The sentence took more effort than he wanted to admit.

“In the morning,” said Wulfgar. “The day has started to inflate itself as if it were important. People act as if there is work to be done. Fields, animals, clearing away dead livestock, rescuing the living. You know how it is.”

"I know," murmured Beowulf. "I always thought that one day I'd stop and lie somewhere while others run."

"Looks like you've done it," said Wulfgar.

Beowulf turned his head slightly. Very slowly. The wound in his side immediately sent someone kicking him from the inside. But he wanted to see. Just a little.

Wigstan was still sitting by the pillar. But he was different now. His face was ashen, his eyes sunken, but he was awake. He looked at the fire as if afraid it would go out if he looked away for even a moment. His right shoulder was tightly bound, his arm hanging in a cloth. He twitched with every movement.

“You’re still coughing,” Beowulf observed.

“You too,” Wigstan replied.

“Then we’re both still alive,” Beowulf murmured. “Like two bad jokes that no one told, but that just won’t go away.”

He leaned the back of his head against the fur someone had placed beneath him. He wasn't sure if it was clean. It smelled of smoke, of humans, of old nights. But it was soft enough for him to realize that there was still a boundary between himself and the wood.

“You know what’s funny?” he began after a while, during which only the crackling of the fire and the occasional cough filled the room. “All my life I thought I could punch time in the face.”

Wulfgar raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean, philosopher?"

“I always thought: If I slay enough monsters, amass enough stories, collect enough scars, then I’ll last longer than the others,” Beowulf murmured. “Not with my body. I never overestimated that. But with my name. With what they say about me when I’ve long since rotted from the inside out.”

"They'll be talking about you," said Wulfgar. "You can bet your life on it. They're already starting to practice."

“Yes,” Beowulf murmured. “I thought it was eternity. That one miscalculates time. That one takes out a kind of loan through deeds that lasts longer than one’s own skin.” He coughed again, inhaling sharply. “But do you know what I realized when I stood there, before that cursed pile of gold?”

“That it stinks terribly in there?” Wigstan interjected dryly.

A thin grin flickered across Beowulf's face. "That too. But above all this: The dragon had more gold than our entire country could gather in a hundred years. More jewels, more trinkets. And yet he will be forgotten. Later they will say: 'Someone lay there once.' A name, perhaps. A word. Nothing more."

He closed his eyes briefly, gathering strength for his next thought.

“I’m lying here,” he continued, “and the crows out there don’t give a damn whether my name is Beowulf or One-Eye. The eternity everyone talks about when they want to cheer themselves up is a joke. Either you’re dead and don’t notice, or you’re alive and it’s no good because you cough too much.”

Wulfgar leaned back slightly and looked into the fire. "So you miscalculated," he said. "You thought formulas of fame and dragons would yield immortality. And in the end, it turns out to be: a hole in the side, a packed hall, a few decades of stories. And then silence again."

“Exactly,” said Beowulf. “I placed too high a bet for the price one gets in the end.”

Wigstan looked at him thoughtfully. "You became king anyway," he said. "And they will still sing your praises."

“That’s the trick,” Beowulf murmured. “They sing your praises so they don’t have to think about themselves. They turn you into a statue in their minds. And once you’re stone, they can put you wherever they like. You’re just decoration in other people’s stories.”

He was silent for a while. The sound of someone splitting wood at the far end of the hall could be heard, presumably to keep the stove going. The muffled "chopping...chopping..." mingled with the rattling in Beowulf's chest.

“And yet you wanted it,” Wulfgar finally said. “No one forced you to sail to foreign lands, tear the heads off monsters, and rescue some kings who were too stupid to close their halls.”

“Of course I wanted it,” Beowulf replied. “I wasn’t born a philosopher. I was a young whippersnapper with too much energy. I wanted my name to be called when the barrels were empty and someone had to pull out a story so the evening wouldn’t end.”

He turned his head slightly towards Wigstan. "And you? What was going through your head when you crawled into that damned wound? Did you think your name would be forever etched in the mead?"

Wigstan shook his head cautiously. "I was just afraid," he said. "And angry. At him. At myself. At everything. And then there was no more time for eternity. Only for 'stab or be eaten'."

Beowulf nodded slowly. "That's the more honest answer."

One of the healers returned, examined his forehead, his breathing, and renewed the bandage on his side. He watched her move her hands. The linen was red, the herbal poultice beneath it dark and sticky.

"How long?" he asked suddenly.

She hesitated. People didn't like that question. They knew that even if they answered honestly, they were usually wrong.

“A few days,” she said finally. “Maybe less. Maybe one or two nights. You’re burning from the inside. We can only cool the surface.”

Beowulf snorted. "I thought so. I can feel it. I'm getting lighter. In the wrong direction."

Wulfgar looked at him. "You always said you wanted to die upright," he said. "In battle, with a sword in your hand."

“Yes,” murmured Beowulf. “That’s what everyone says while they’re still standing. No one says, ‘I want to lie in my own juices and watch my body give up the ghost while people stare into my eyes.’ But that’s usually how it is. Heroes miscalculate eternity and their grand exit.”

He reached for Wulfgar's burned forearm and squeezed gently, as best he could. "I always thought: if I die, it will be somewhere outside, in the rain, in the mud. Instead, here I am lying

on a bench, plastered with herbs, with a priest at my back, shadowing me, and a boy who will be my heir, whether he likes it or not."

Wigstan shook his head. "I don't want to be king."

"Then I hope they don't ask you," Beowulf muttered. "Being king usually means you're sitting right at the front when the shit starts, and you're the last one to leave when everyone else has left. Power is just another word for 'you're the official lightning rod.'"

The priest, who had remained nearby, heard the words but kept silent. He had understood that this was not the moment for divine propaganda. He simply held his staff, as if supporting the beams.

“I believed,” said Beowulf, “that what I do would be weighed down somewhere. That gods or time or someone else would weigh it and say, ‘He has spilled so much dragon’s blood, he gets fifty years of mention, plus a free ballad.’”

He snorted.

"In the end, you realize: the only calculation that's truly accurate is the one your body presents to you. Broken ribs – two days less. Open abdomen – game over. Coughing up blood – no extension. And if you're lucky, someone will be sitting next to you who pronounces your name correctly when you can't open your mouth anymore."

Wulfgar nodded slowly. "You didn't expect it to feel like this, did you?"

“No,” said Beowulf. “I thought eternity was a long, clear river that you eventually wade into when your body has done enough. Now I know: eternity is just what others say about you while they drown their own demons. And you're not in the river, you're on the bank and you can't see it anymore.”

He felt the burning sensation in his side again. It spread as if someone were stoking new fires inside. The herbs dampened it, but not enough.

"I miscalculated," he muttered, more to himself than to the others. "I thought I could pay for eternity with dragon's blood. In the end, I'm only paying with my own, like everyone else."

Wigstan looked at him, his eyes serious, far too old for his face. "Nevertheless," he said softly, "without you I would have been standing in there alone. And I wouldn't have gotten out again."

“Perhaps that’s the only thing that matters,” Wulfgar said. “Not eternity. Just the one who can say: ‘I would have been gone otherwise.’”

Beowulf closed his eyes again. This time for longer. The voices grew muffled. He heard the scratching of a quill somewhere in the corner—some scribe jotting down the first sentences.

"They will write," he thought. "They will move things around, delete them, add to them. And the one lying here will have nothing more to say."

The hero miscalculated eternity. And in the end, all he had left was this morning, this bench, these few faces. Everything else already belonged to those who would continue to breathe.

The day crept further into the hall like an uninvited guest who nevertheless arrives at the table. Eventually, they stopped pretending it was still early. Men went out to check on the fields, the livestock, the dead who no longer returned of their own accord. The hall became emptier, yet more intense. Those who remained were those for whom it wasn't enough to merely hear from outside when their king breathed his last.

Beowulf drifted in a semi-conscious state. The herbs drew him sometimes closer to the surface, sometimes deeper. Every now and then, everything cleared briefly, as if someone had thrown open a window in his mind. Then he saw sharply, felt every fiber, every burning sensation. Then it became milky again, the voices faded into noises, the fire into a stain.

Here and there, someone approached his pew as if it were a bed in a poorhouse where word had spread that someone lay there whom they should know. Some briefly placed their hand on his forearm, some bowed, a few simply stood and stared, as if trying to commit this image to memory for later, when lies had to be paid for.

A young warrior, barely bearded, approached at some point, uncertain as a dog walking into a new pack. "Sir," he murmured, "I... I wanted to thank you."

Beowulf blinked. "What for? So you can run around while I lie here trying not to leak?"

“For taking the dragon from us,” said the boy. “My sister… her farm… her husband… the fire already reached the pasture. If you hadn’t…”

Beowulf waved his fingers dismissively, as best he could. "All right. The dragon wasn't dead because of you. He was old. He was full. It was his turn. I was just the idiot who got in the way at the right moment."

The boy swallowed, unsure whether to laugh or cry. He decided on nothing, merely nodding frantically, then stepped back as if he had done something wrong.

“You need a story that fits,” Beowulf muttered when the boy was out of earshot. “‘The king killed the dragon, so my hut is safe again.’ It’s easier than writing: ‘The world is chaotic and everything burns when it wants to.’”

"Leave them be," said Wulfgar. "Most of them never leave a field their whole lives. If they tell each other in the evening that someone went over the hill and killed the cattle, they sleep better. There's no need to shit in their dreams."

"I know," murmured Beowulf. "I just wish that at least I wasn't lying to myself."

He turned his head, looking for Wigstan. He was still sitting there, but closer to the fire. There was something new in his face: not just exhaustion, not just pain. That rigid, quiet "What now?" that men have when they've reached a summit and realize that beyond it it's all downhill, and no one has told them how to descend gracefully.

"Come here," croaked Beowulf. It sounded more like a command than a request, and it surprised him that he could still do it.

Wigstan stood up, slowly, awkwardly. The first step was an interrogation of his body: Would his leg hold? Yes. Was his chest breathing? Sort of. Was his mind clear enough to fall over if necessary. He dragged himself to the bench and stood next to Wulfgar.

"Sit down," murmured Beowulf. "I'm old enough to talk to you lying down. You're young enough not to have to stand."

Wigstan sat down, cautiously; his shoulder protested, as did the ribs below it.

“You were inside it,” Beowulf began, “in the belly. You know what it was like. You will be the one who was closest when they talk about the battle. The bards will fight over your mouth like crows over a dead sheep.”

Wigstan grimaced. "I don't want to be the center of attention."

"That's the problem," murmured Beowulf. "Those who are supposed to be the center of attention don't want it. Those who shout themselves hoarse have usually never had blood on their knees."

He inhaled slowly, held it briefly, and exhaled again. Each breath was an effort, but not yet impossible.

“You will make mistakes,” he said. “In telling stories, in living, in sleeping. Sometimes you will stare at the night and give the dragon in your head a different shape because you can’t stand the right one. You will tell yourself lies so you can keep going. And you will realize: That’s normal. The only difference is whether you eventually clean up your own mess or whether you suffocate in it.”

Wigstan nodded slowly. "What should I say if they ask?"

"Tell the truth," murmured Beowulf. "As far as you can bear it. If they ask you about heroic deeds, tell them of the moment you thought you were about to die in the dark and no one noticed. If they ask about splendor, tell them about the stench. If they ask about songs, tell them what it was like when no one sang."

“Nobody wants to hear that,” Wigstan whispered.

“Some, yes,” Beowulf replied. “Not all. But a few. And that’s enough. Eternity isn’t when the whole land roars your name. Eternity is when, fifty years from now, someone is sitting in some dingy tavern, hand around a mug, and suddenly says, ‘My grandfather was there then. He said it wasn’t like the songs say.’ And then he lowers his voice and tells your version. That’s all there really is. Small, skewed eternities in minds too weary for heroic glory.”

Wigstan remained silent. He noticed his throat tightening, this time not from coughing.

"What about you?" he asked after a while. "What do you want them to say about you?"

Beowulf pondered. This was new. Before, he would have had the answer ready: strong, fearless, victor over Grendel, protector, king. Now he weighed the words in his mind like stones he no longer wanted to carry.

“Let them say,” he began slowly, “that I was someone who always went too far. Sometimes too far. That I broke more than I could repair. That I often realized too late when someone was suffering, not just my enemies.”

He closed his eyes briefly, seeing faces that were no longer there. Men who had fallen in his battles. Women who had stood at the edge of the hall with those silent, hollow eyes. Children who had looked at him with a mixture of awe and fear when he entered the hall with blood on his chainmail.

“Let them say,” he continued, “that sometimes I preferred drinking to thinking. That I shouted at the gods and simultaneously offered them sacrifices because I was too cowardly to renounce them entirely. That I never understood when to stop. Not in battle, not in life.”

Wulfgar grinned crookedly. "This won't be a pretty song," he said.

"Then it's mine," murmured Beowulf. "And somewhere in between they can talk about dragons, if they must."

The priest stepped closer again, cautiously, as if he didn't trust the conversation. "It's time," he said softly. "Not..." he paused, searching for a word that didn't sound like a judgment, "...it's drawing near."

"What?" asked Beowulf.

“The moment,” said the priest. “People see it. You can feel it. The hides, the beams, everything is waiting.”

Beowulf snorted. “The beams can wait until they rot. I’ll go when my body decides it’s had enough.”

"He's close," said the healer, emerging from the shadowy half of the hall. "We can continue to dull the pain. But the heat inside you is eating away at you. You'll grow more and more tired. Eventually... you'll fall asleep. If you're lucky."

"What if I'm unlucky?" asked Beowulf.

“If you stay stuck in this intermediate state for too long,” she said frankly, “you choke, you struggle, you hear everything and can't do anything anymore. I've seen it.”

He looked at her. Honesty was like a cold cloth on his face.

"Don't make it worse than necessary," he muttered. "If you have any more herbs... stronger ones... I don't want to be fully conscious while my lungs try to escape through my throat."

She nodded. "There is something," she said. "It doesn't take your breath away. But it puts a heavy blanket over your head. You get tired. And when your body decides to leave, you'll feel it like stepping into deep snow. Not pleasant. But more bearable."

Wulfgar growled softly, more to himself: "Between sleep and poison."

"Give it here," said Beowulf. "All my life I have stood prepared to die sober. Now that the time has come, I realize: I don't have to clean everything up."

The healer mixed fresh herbs into the water, stirring until the scent became sharper, crisper, with a sweet undertone reminiscent of rotten fruit. She brought the cup to his lips.

“Slowly,” she said. “Otherwise your stomach will rebel.”

He drank. Sip by sip. Each one went down heavily, lingering in his throat for a moment, as if his body were debating whether it was a good idea.

Wigstan watched, unsure whether to be glad or angry that the king had to build his exit with plants while everyone in the room acted as if it were a form of dignity.

"You look like you still have something to say," Wulfgar murmured to him.

“I… I don’t know what to say to a man who is dying,” Wigstan whispered.

“Say nothing,” said Beowulf, who had overheard. “You’ll need your words for later. Save them. For nights when you think you haven’t said enough. Then you’ll be glad you have them in your head.”

The herbs began to take effect. Slowly. The world became heavier, as if someone had wrapped it in wet cloths. The voices deepened, slowed, and grew long tails of echo.

“Wulfgar,” murmured Beowulf.

“Yes,” said Wulfgar.

"You stay with him," said Beowulf, nodding curtly in Wigstan's direction. "Until he's either king or drowned somewhere drunk. Don't let him think he's finished too soon. No matter what they put on his head."

“I’ll stay,” said Wulfgar. “Until someone carries me out or some other bastard with a hole in his stomach needs my place.”

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "I would have liked to control eternity. Now I'll be content with the fact that there's someone who knows how I snored."

He leaned his head back again. The ceiling blurred. The beams became dark lines, ending somewhere in the mist. He could still feel his body, but it was becoming increasingly alien. Like a house you're halfway out of.

"I'm not leaving today to make her happy," he thought. "I'm leaving because the bill is full."

The hero miscalculated eternity. But he could at least try not to miscalculate his own end as well.

Outside a rooster crowed, late, confused, as if he had forgotten when to crow.

"Not yet," murmured Beowulf. "Just a little bit longer."

The herbs settled like snow over the world. Voices faded into the distance, the fire became a distant, warm spot.

Wigstan coughed again, more quietly. Wulfgar sat there, heavy, motionless like a watchdog who knows that his master is about to stop breathing.

It wouldn't be long now. And yet, the moment dragged on like a bad evening.

The hero lay there, and eternity remained where it was: outside, in the mouth of foreign stories.

It grew quieter, without anyone calling for silence. No sudden stillness, no divine finger on the lips of the hall—rather, this slow, imperceptible fading, like when a feast winds down and the mead level in the barrel drops. The voices retreated to the edges, into corners, to tables, into their own thoughts. The fire in the center continued to crackle, as if it were accustomed to its duties and death merely another layer.

Beowulf lay there, feeling the herbs wrapping around his head. Not like a clean bandage, more like an old, heavy cloth you put over someone's eyes when they're annoying them. He was still there. He could still hear. He could still smell. That was the problem.

The wound in his side was no longer a sharp, throbbing pain. More like a dull crater, something glowing inside. It felt as if someone had built a fire pit into it and forgotten to stack the wood properly. Sometimes it flickered up, sometimes it sank, sometimes there was only a hot remnant that nevertheless burned everything nearby.

He heard someone fiddling with the barrel. The muffled gurgling of mead flowing into cups. Someone laughed too loudly, instantly becoming embarrassing, then fell silent mid-laughter. Someone whispered a prayer, stumbling over their own words. Somewhere a log fell over. Small things. The world simply carried on, unaware that he was ending it.

“Wigstan,” he murmured. His tongue was heavy, as if it were made of leather.

“Yes,” came the quiet reply, close to him.

"Can you still hear me?"

"Yes."

“Good,” said Beowulf. “As long as someone can still hear me, I am not entirely in their possession.”

“Whose property?” Wigstan asked.

“Those who tell the tale later,” Beowulf murmured. “When there’s no one left to know your voice, they’ll do with you as they please. Then you suddenly become noble, brave, pure. I was never that clean. You were there. You know how much filth was inside.”

Wigstan remained silent. He could have said, "You were my king, you were great, you were—" any of the phrases one stumbles out in such moments. But he had been there, in the

gut, in the stench, in the screaming. He had seen the old man standing in the fire, trembling, defiant, half-burned. That was not the stuff from which smooth idols were carved.

“I will remember,” he simply said. “Just as it was.”

"That's enough," murmured Beowulf.

Wulfgar was still sitting on the edge of the bench, his back hunched. He looked like an old dog who had realized his master wasn't going to get up, but was staying put in case someone tried to steal his body. His burned forearm lay stiff on his knee, his other hand hanging loosely, but not weakly.

"You're breathing more quietly," Wulfgar observed. Not cautiously, not sentimentally. Like a matter-of-fact note.

“Perhaps your hearing isn’t what it used to be,” Beowulf retorted. It wasn’t really a joke anymore, more like the memory of one.

The priest sat by the fire, his hands held over it as if he were cold. He suddenly seemed small. The staff leaned beside him, unmoved. The gods were far away, if they had ever been closer than an idea in a tired mind.

“Do you still want to pray?” he asked the room without standing up. It didn’t sound like an offer, more like the question of a man unsure whether his craft was still needed.

"If you must pray, then do so," murmured Beowulf. "But do it for those who remain. Eternity is their illness, not mine."

The priest nodded, and began again that murmuring, somewhere between a plea, an apology, and a bad poem. Beowulf heard the words, but they came from a great distance, as if someone had thrown them into a well.

The herbs made his flesh heavier and his thoughts lighter. It was a strange trade: his body became a boulder he could no longer lift, his head a loose bag full of images.

He saw Grendel lose his arm and make that surprised, almost childlike face before the pain hit him. He saw the mother in the lake, the murky water, the cold, the bones at the bottom. He saw the dragon, the hill, the gold that had glittered like a bad joke while men died.

In between, he saw small things. A woman who had once given him bread when he was young and still unimportant to anyone. The look on the face of a man he had personally ordered executed for killing another in a fight. The faces of his followers after a victorious battle—that greedy, relieved, weary grin.

"I didn't understand anything," he thought. "I just kept going."

He coughed again. His body jerked, his side burned, then subsided. This time there was hardly any redness. More of a watery, dark film.

"That's almost it," murmured the healer, who was standing close by. "You don't have much left, King."

"He was never one to hold back much," Beowulf crooned.

She brushed a sweaty strand of hair from his forehead. It wasn't a tender gesture, more of a practical one. So she could see his face when he left.

A sound drifted into the hall from outside: wood being hauled, voices that rose briefly, then fell silent again. Someone had begun to build what everyone was thinking about but no one wanted to talk about while they were still breathing.

"They're starting with the pile," Wulfgar said quietly.

"Which pile?" murmured Beowulf.

“This is for you,” Wulfgar replied. “When you leave, you shouldn’t have to get cold for long.”

"Well, at least I don't have to watch them stacking the wood," said Beowulf. "That would be embarrassing. Standing out there talking about honor while stacking planks like they're preparing a roast pork."

"You'll smell the smoke," said Wulfgar. "Whether you see it is another matter."

Wigstan looked towards the door, then back at Beowulf. A tug in his chest, not just from coughing. The thought that they were already building the scaffolding out there where this man, who had been a mixture of fairytale figure and threat to him since childhood, would lie, made him breathe.

“I don’t want to be there when they carry you up,” Wigstan said suddenly. It slipped out before he knew whether it was a request or a confession. “I… I don’t know if I can bear it.”

Beowulf turned his head towards him as best he could. His eyes had shrunk, but behind them was still that old, impudent glint.

"Then go out when the time comes," he muttered. "No one said you had to witness every mistake. You've already been close enough."

“But one… one should…”

“One shouldn’t do anything,” Beowulf interrupted. “Stop with ‘one.’ There is no ‘one.’ There is only you, your shoulder, your lungs, your nights. If you can’t see me burning, then don’t see it. The important thing is that you know why.”

Wulfgar nodded. "We'll carry him," he said. "You can stand on the edge, or in the shade, or vomit outside. Anything goes. There's no right place when a king dies. Only different ways of enduring it."

A few glances from the hall fell upon her. People listened, but didn't stare. Everyone found their place in the scene. Some stood close, so they could say, "I was right at the front." Others further back, so the image in their minds remained softened.

Beowulf closed his eyes. This time not simply to rest briefly. It felt like a test: What happens when I close them completely?

Darkness was there, of course. But not a sacred darkness. No tunnel, no light, no outstretched arms of gods. Just a dark space where his thoughts lingered for a while, like drunks lingering outside after curfew.

"If there's nothing over there," he thought, "I don't care anymore. I've spent my whole life fighting with things I could see. If I fall into nothingness now, that's still more honest than a sky full of promises no one can afford."

The sounds faded into the distance. He could still hear the healer whispering to someone. The priest pausing briefly in his murmuring, then continuing. Wulfgar shifting his position, the bench creaking. Wigstan coughing once more.

"Breathe," said a voice inside him.

He inhaled. It worked. Difficult, but it worked. The air came with that metallic aftertaste. His chest rose, his side twinged, but not like before.

He exhaled. There was a noise, a rattling after-effect.

One more time. On. Off.

The world shrank. The edges darkened, as if the beams were moving closer together. The space around him shrank to the surface of the bench, the ceiling above him, the two faces that were closest.

“Wulfgar,” he murmured, barely audible.

“Yes,” said Wulfgar, already very close above him.

"If they later say I left quietly..."

"Yes?"

“…then lie a little for me,” whispered Beowulf. “Tell them I spat in the gods’ faces as I left. That sounds better than admitting I was just tired.”

Wulfgar smiled thinly. "I'll tell them you knocked the cup out of their hands."

"Good," murmured Beowulf. "Make it big. If you're going to invent something, do it right."

"Do you want anything else?" asked Wulfgar.

Beowulf paused for a moment. The images in his mind slowed down.

"Yes," he whispered. "Shut up now. I want to hear my body stop."

Wulfgar remained silent. The hall was silent too. Not completely – somewhere someone coughed, a log fell, a child whimpered in its sleep – but the area around the bench grew more crowded.

Beowulf took another breath. It was only half in. The exhalation was longer.

One more breath. Shorter.

One last attempt. One.

Nothing.

A pause. A long one. Too long to become another breath.

The healer placed two fingers on his neck, beneath his beard, which smelled of smoke. She waited. She counted silently to some number she had learned from others. There was no pulse. Only warmth, which would soon be gone.

"He's left," she said. No big announcement. Just that.

The priest fell silent. Wulfgar let his shoulders slump, but only for a moment. Then he straightened up, as if he now had to carry twice the weight.

Wigstan stared at the face. It hadn't become peaceful, noble, or radiant. Just silent. His mouth slightly open, as if he had stopped speaking mid-curse.

A low murmur went through the hall. Someone sobbed. Someone clumsily knocked over a cup, which clattered to the floor. Someone automatically began a prayer, then fell silent, their voice failing them.

Wulfgar leaned forward and placed his hand on Beowulf's forehead. It was still warm.

"Well then," he muttered, "you've done it, you old bastard."

Outside, they continued hauling wood. The pile grew larger.

The hero had miscalculated eternity. In the end, there was a dead body on a bench, a hall full of people who didn't know what to do with their hands, and a hill outside, already waiting to swallow another name.

The next reckoning would not be with blood and dragons, but with fire and smoke.

The only remaining question was: How do you burn a king without burning yourself in the process?

CHAPTER 31 – How to Burn a King

You don't wake up in the morning knowing how to burn a king. There's no teacher for that, no neatly carved tablet with instructions: first wood, then words, then fire. Most of them had only ever buried cows, left warriors in the fields, or, at worst, laid a brother to rest. Now there lay a man on the bench who had more stories in him than the entire hall, and everyone was acting as if they'd always known what was coming next.

They didn't know.

Beowulf lay still. The healer had closed his eyes, not out of respect, but so the children wouldn't wake up to his gaze at night. His mouth was slightly open, as if he had stopped mid-curse. Someone had tried to straighten his beard, but it was just as stubborn as its former owner.

The air in the hall was heavy, sweetish, stale. It smelled of mead, smoke, and that very particular scent of freshly killed flesh that seeps into the wood. Wulfgar was still sitting beside the bench, his back hunched, his burned arm in his lap like a foreign object. He hadn't really slept for hours. Maybe for days.

“We have to start,” said one who looked as if he were speaking out voluntarily for the first time in his life. A second or third cousin, too clean, too polished, someone who had always stood in the king’s shadow without ever getting his hands dirty.

Wulfgar slowly raised his head. "With what? With talking or with stacking?"

"With... with the rituals." The man searched for the words like someone trying to catch an eel. "With what is proper."

“What is proper,” Wulfgar repeated, tasting the word as if he had bitten into wood. “Has anything ever been ‘proper’ around here?”

The priest stepped closer, his staff in hand, which looked more like furniture than something sacred. His eyes were small, but not cowardly. He understood that this wasn't a performance, but a shift of work.

“The people are waiting,” he said calmly. “They are starting to stand in front of the hall. They want to see him while he is still flesh. They want to be sure that he is really dead and not just sitting in the nearest mead jug.”

"Let them look," Wulfgar growled.

“It’s also about saying goodbye to him,” one of the healers interjected. The one with the gray streaks in her hair, the one who had closed his eyes. “He will burn. How many men have disappeared into the fire without anyone saying a single honest word? This time, at least, we could pretend to try.”

Wigstan leaned against the pillar, his right shoulder bandaged, his eyes sunken deep. He felt as if someone had taken him into the night and then forgotten to bring him back. The movement in the hall felt like a strange current, on the edge of which he stood.

"How do you do that?" he asked simply. No pathos, just a quiet note into the room. "How do you cremate a man like him?"

There was a brief silence. Everyone knew that the sentence was far too big for just anyone standing there.

"You start small," Wulfgar finally said. "With wood."

Outside, they had already started before he died. Men who couldn't sit in the hall because the silence itched in their bones had hauled beams, planks, anything that was still halfway dry and hadn't already fallen victim to the dragon. The pile stood not far from the hill, but not too close. Nobody wanted the ground to crack open again and another forgotten monster to crawl out of the earth.

They went out. Not in an orderly procession, not in a neat line. More like a group of people, each with their own reason for not being the first to arrive. Wulfgar in front, Wigstan somewhere diagonally beside him, his steps unsteady. Behind them, the priest, then the others – men, women, a few teenagers with eyes that were too big and hands that were too small.

The wind was cold. Not hellish, just stark. It cut through the cracks in the armor, through the filthy furs, through every crevice where blood had dried. The scent of a prepared fire already hung over the pile: stale smoke, resin, old wood.

They had gone to great lengths. They really had. The funeral pyre was high, almost like a small tower, with heavy logs at the base, topped with crossbeams, branches, and brushwood. Into the gaps they had placed shields, dented helmets, and spears, as if, even in death, they wanted to give him armor made of things he knew. A few pieces of jewelry glittered among them, meager compared to the treasure in the dragon's belly, but out here it was everything they had.

"It turned out beautifully," Wulfgar said dryly. "Almost like a piece of furniture from a wealthy home."

"Wood is wood," muttered one of the men who had worked on it for half the day. "In the end, it all burns the same. King or pig."

“No,” said the priest standing next to him. “What burns is not the same. It’s what happens in our minds that makes the difference.”

"I can't take any more into my head right now," the man growled.

Wulfgar stopped in front of the pile. "Where do we put it?"

“Up above,” said the priest. “As it should be, above everything.”

“Above everything,” Wulfgar repeated. “Even above us. Even in the fire.”

They brought the stretcher out of the hall, four men at each end, shoulders tense, fingers white on the handles. Beowulf lay upon it, wrapped in freshly laid linen, already stained dark along the sides. Someone had placed a sword beside him, not his old, battered one, but one of the good, shining ones, the kind usually reserved for special occasions.

"He would have wanted the old one," Wulfgar murmured.

"The old one lies somewhere in dragon flesh and gold," said Wigstan. "At least this one hasn't told any lies yet."

The men lifted him up, slowly climbing the planks that leaned at an angle against the pile. Every step was a stumble between "don't fall" and "don't drop." The wind tugged at their coats, as if it wanted to have its say.

Wigstan watched as they lifted the body to its feet. His stomach clenched, not from coughing, but from something closer to panic than he was willing to admit. A healer stood beside him, briefly placing her hand on his elbow. It wasn't comforting. It was merely an observation: you're not the only one teetering right now.

Up top, they laid Beowulf on the prepared spot, between beams and shields. They positioned him as if it would make a difference whether he lay straight or crooked once the fire had taken hold. One of the men adjusted the hide beneath his head. Another placed the unburned hand around his sword.

"He can't hold on to anything anymore," said Wulfgar.

“Then we will hold the stand for him,” replied the priest.

The men descended again, slowly, with that strange feeling as if they had carried up something heavier than wood and meat.

Once they reached the bottom, they just stood there. No plan, no commands. Just that "Now what?" look in hundreds of eyes.

“Now we’ll talk,” said the priest.

“You’re talking,” Wulfgar corrected. “We’re listening. Some of us, at least.”

The priest took a few steps forward so that he could be seen from all sides. The staff in his hand was stuck in the ground, as if he himself needed some kind of pyre to keep him from falling over.

“Beowulf is dead,” he said simply. No flowery words. “He was king, warrior, bastard, drunkard, protector, destroyer. Each of you has a different version of him in your head. Some of you see the man who saved your village. Others the one who sent your sons into battles from which they never returned. All are right.”

A murmur. Someone coughed. Someone somewhere in the back wept silently.

“We are not burning him to cleanse him,” the priest continued. “We are burning him because meat rots and fire, at least, is honest. The gods will do their part with what remains of him. But we… we are doing this for ourselves. So that we know we didn’t just leave him lying around like a dead dog.”

Wulfgar nodded almost imperceptibly. That was more than he had expected from the man.

The priest looked up at the group. “He killed the dragon, yes. But he didn’t kill it alone. Many went into the cave with him, few came out again. The dragon lies beneath the mountain you can still see steaming back there. Some of you didn’t even get your dead back whole. The anger about that belongs here. Not just the gratitude.”

Wigstan felt his throat tighten. In his mind were faces that were now rotting somewhere beneath gold, rock, and dragon paraphernalia.

“He was brave,” said the priest. “But bravery isn’t a clean thing. It stinks, it screams, it leaves blood on the ground. If we lay him on this pile today and set fire to him, it’s not because he was a saint. But because he was one of those who got their hands dirty instead of just talking about it.”

He was silent for a moment. The wind took the words from his lips and scattered them over the hill.

“Now,” he said more quietly, “someone who was closer than me should speak. Someone who was there when he fell. Someone who saw what it was really like.”

As if on cue, all eyes turned to Wigstan.

He felt it before he saw it. That pulling of the eyes on his body, like hooks. His stomach churned. A cough threatened to rise. He swallowed.

“Not me,” he wanted to say. “Find someone who can talk without his heart falling out of his chest.”

Wulfgar took a step closer to him. "You were inside," he said calmly. "In the gut. In the fight. You can lie or you can say it bluntly. But it's your turn."

Wigstan looked at the pile, at the body on top, at the hill behind it, at the people who were all acting as if he had grown taller just because he had survived.

"I have blood in my lungs," he thought. "And yet they still want me to talk."

He stepped forward. His legs felt like they were made of wood, badly carved. Every movement pulled through his shoulder.

“When you fall over,” said a small voice inside him, “that’s also a kind of speech.”

He stood in front of the group. The wind ruffled his hair. The faces blurred briefly, then came into focus again.

He took a breath. It burned. He coughed, right at the beginning, a short, ugly sound. A dark stain in the snow of expected words.

"So," he thought. "At least now they know what my truth sounds like."

He raised his head, looked out at the crowd, and knew that what he said now would later be twisted a hundred times over. But now, in this moment, it still belonged to him.

And above it all lay the pile on which a king waited for someone to finally fetch the fire.

Wigstan stood there in front and noticed his knees wobbling. Not from awe. From tiredness. From pain. From that shitty mix that comes when your body says, "I've had enough for today," and the world replies, "Tough luck, you're not done yet."

He saw the faces before him. He only knew many of them by sight, from passing by in the hall, from fields, from days when he had still believed his biggest problem was a crooked plow. Now they stared at him as if he were suddenly something called a "witness".

He took a breath, felt the burning deep in his chest and thought: "If I don't say anything now, later only those who weren't there will talk."

“I’m no bard,” he began. His voice was rough, scratchy, as if someone had put sand in his lungs. “I have no beautiful words. If you want them, wait until someone sits down and starts writing songs. Those will shine. These won’t.”

A few in the crowd flinched. They had hoped for something celebratory, something with 'glory' and 'eternal' and 'gods looking down smilingly'. Wigstan spat blood into the snow of expectations.

“In the cave,” he continued, “nothing glittered. Not the gold. Not the king. Not us. Everything stank. Of fear. Of burnt flesh. Of what comes out when someone is torn apart from the inside.”

Images flashed before him, so clear that for a moment he felt as if he were standing beneath the beast's belly once more. The pile of gold on which the dragon lay, like a fat, sleeping god. The fire that had consumed the air. The roar that made his bones vibrate.

“He,” he nodded to the group, “went into the smoke ahead of me. I saw the fire grab him, bite him, and laugh at him. He was old. He had already fought enough battles before he went in there. You heard him sing, your fathers heard him sing. You saw him roar. I saw him cough. See him bleed. See him fall.”

Someone inhaled sharply. A woman somewhere in the back held a cloth over her mouth.

“The songs will say later that he fell with a final battle cry,” said Wigstan. “Perhaps someone will even claim that he cracked a joke as he died, making everyone laugh. That’s nice. That’s how they like to talk. I’ll tell you how it was: He fought until his body no longer understood any commands. He screamed because some cursed monster had ripped open his side. He spat blood like a man whose own body is at war. And yet he kept going forward. Not because he wasn’t afraid. But because he was too proud to go backward.”

The words hung in the air, heavy as wet furs.

“I,” he briefly placed his hand on his chest, “climbed into the dragon’s belly. Not because I’m brave. It was just… my turn. Someone had to. Wulfgar chased me in, the cave swallowed me whole, the dragon shook me like a bone. I screamed. I thought I’d die in there alone, and no one outside would ever know what it was like. And I swear to you on everything that’s even remotely sacred around here: I was terrified. I hated every damn breath.”

A thin, nervous murmur ran through the rows. Fear was not a word one readily associated with heroic deeds.

“Nevertheless, I stabbed,” he continued. “Again and again. Because he had to die. Not for gods. Not for glory. For the fields you have left behind. For the children who don’t yet know what burnt flesh sounds like. For the old men who can no longer run. For the women who don’t want to feel fire on their necks while milking.”

He coughed, half-doubled over, and spat dark red phlegm into the dirt. No heroic noise. Just his body saying what's what.

“When you tell stories about him later,” he pointed at the pile again, “say that he wasn’t a clean, shining hero. Say that he swore. That he drank. That he made mistakes that others had to pay for. That he often realized too late what his anger was doing. But also say that he went in there when most of you would have turned back halfway up the slope. Say that he didn’t look away when the fire was at the door. And say that in the end he understood that all that fame meant nothing to him if he was lying gasping on a bench.”

The priest listened, the healer listened, Wulfgar listened. The crowd listened, even though some of them were already inwardly busy smoothing over the rough edges of his words.

“I won’t make him out to be holier than he was,” said Wigstan. “I owe him the truth. He told me to keep it, even if no one wants to hear it. So when you’re sitting around the fire later, stuffed and drunk, and a bard takes out his lyre and starts singing to you about golden skies and shining kings—just remember for a moment that up there”—he gestured to the pile—“he stank, he bled, and he was scared. Just like you would be. And yet he still left.”

He remained silent. The wind took the last sentence from his mouth and carried it somewhere where words no longer have any power.

For a moment, nothing happened. No progress, no agreement. Just that raw, uncomfortable feeling when someone is too honest in picking at a wound.

Then it was Wulfgar who broke the silence. "Good," he said gruffly. "Now you know. If you still want to make a big deal out of it, that's your fault, not his."

A few men looked away, as if they had seen their king without his cloak for the first time. Others stared more intently. In some eyes, there was anger—not at Wigstan, but at the image that was slowly beginning to crack in their minds.

The priest stepped forward again and briefly placed his hand on Wigstan's injured shoulder. It wasn't an act of acquiescence. More like, "You have done your part."

"That's enough," Wulfgar said quietly to him. "This place can't handle any more truth today."

Wigstan nodded, staggered back half a step until he was standing next to the others again. His knees almost buckled. He felt as if he had placed more of himself on the pile than wood and memories.

Now came the part everyone had been expecting: the neat, clean part.

"Who will start the first fire?" asked one of the older men.

All eyes turned back to Wulfgar. It was only logical. He had stood beside Beowulf the longest, had drunk with him, fought with him, argued with him, and shared moments of silence with him. If anyone was to light the fire, it would be the one who would suffer most from what remained.

Wulfgar took a deep breath. His lungs burned, but not like Wigstan's. His fire burned in other places.

“I,” he said. “But not alone.”

He took a torch that was already laid out. The tip was soaked in pitch, the fabric black, the wood greasy from many hands. He held it to the small fire they had prepared next to the pile, a tired flame waiting to burst forth.

The bad luck started immediately. The torch was lit. Not heroically, just dutifully.

“Wigstan,” said Wulfgar.

“No,” came almost automatically from the boy.

“Yes,” said Wulfgar. “We got him out of the cave together. We’ll bring him into the fire together.”

Wigstan shivered. Not just from the cold. But he stepped forward. His left hand—his right was useless—closed around the torch handle, over Wulfgar's finger. Two hands holding a piece of burning future.

The crowd moved closer together, but not too close. Everyone wanted to see. No one wanted to get too close to a god who had just been transformed back into flesh.

"For him," Wulfgar murmured.

"For those who didn't get out," Wigstan added.

“For us,” said the healer.

The priest said nothing. Perhaps he was praying. Perhaps he was simply counting in his head how many of them were left.

They walked around the pile, searching for the dry spots where the resin glittered in the cracks. Wulfgar knelt and placed the flame on the first corner. The firewood gratefully took hold. A soft crackle, a small cry of sparks.

Wigstan went to the other side, his arm aching with every movement. He held the torch to a spot where straw and brushwood were stuck between the larger tree trunks. The fire quickly caught there too.

It wasn't a big deal at first. Several small tongues shyly licked the wood. The crowd held its breath, even though nothing spectacular was happening.

"That's how it always starts," thought Wulfgar. "With a tiny bite."

They stepped back. They dropped the torch into the grass, where another man stamped it out. From now on, it was a matter of wood and air.

The fire grew slowly. It crept up the sides, found cracks, licked at old, dry bark. A shield was the first to truly catch fire. The old paint disappeared, the steel rim glowed before it turned black. A spear shaft cracked as something inside burst.

The smoke rose. First grey, then darker. It smelled of wood, of resin, of pitch. Not yet of humans. Not yet of kings.

People stood around it in a semicircle. Some were kneeling, others stood with their arms folded, as if holding themselves up. A few children hid behind furs, peering through cracks.

Wigstan felt his stomach clench as the flames crept higher. They licked at the shields, climbed over beams, and drew closer to the body above.

"He gets warm first, then hot, then gone," he thought. "That's the order. No matter how much you were before."

The heat came in waves. First pleasant on the cold hands, then more intense, painful on the face. The smoke irritated the eyes, making them water. No one knew if it was from the fire or from what they were feeling.

They could still see his face. His outline was still visible against the sky.

It was only a matter of minutes before the flames reached there as well.

Wigstan thought that one doesn't learn how to burn a king from a book. One simply stands there and watches the fire do its work – and wonders what of it remains within oneself.

There comes a moment when the fire changes. Before that, it's just wood burning. Beams, shields, spears, furs. Things. Stuff. Stuff. You stand there, maybe covering your eyes with your hand, coughing a little, but your head says: It's just a pile.

And then it all changes.

The flames had eaten their way up, first the shields, then the crossbeams, then the hides. There were crackling, crashing, and spattering sounds. Resin exploded in tiny sparks, a shield half-fell from its structure, only to be consumed again by the flames. The heat beat down on all their faces, as if they were too close to a faulty stove.

Wigstan noticed the moment the smell changed. The wood scent was still there, clear, strong. But underneath it, something heavy and sweet crept in, something everyone recognized, even those who pretended to be too refined to notice it. That's what it smelled like when meat was involved. Not pork, not beef. Human.

He swallowed, his throat dry, though his eyes were watering. A cough rose, pressing in his chest like a fist. He held it back briefly, then his body won. He coughed, deeply, rustily. Red scum spurted into the dirt at his feet.

No one turned around. Everyone stared ahead, at the heap, which was now growing louder. Flames licked at the spot where Beowulf's legs had lain. The furs caught fire completely, becoming blazing sheets beneath which contours blurred.

“Now the king is beginning to burn,” thought Wulfgar, and it was a sober, brutal sentence.

He stood close to Wigstan, so close that their shoulders sometimes brushed when one of them lost their balance. The heat burned his beard, and his eyes were already burning. His burned forearm pulsed in time with the flame, as if it had transformed into an additional source of fire.

"Is this how you imagined your farewell?" he murmured quietly towards the group, even though the person up there couldn't hear anything anymore. "With all those stupid faces in the circle and a priest trying to find words that don't sound like old bones?"

The priest was still standing a little way in front of the crowd, his staff in his hand, his gaze fixed on the flames. He had stopped speaking. There was nothing more to explain. Everyone understood in their own way what had happened. Some more, some less.

The fire grew louder. It went from a crackling to a roar. Air was sucked in, pushed out, as if the pile itself were breathing. That's what it sounded like when wood and meat burned together.

Up above, amidst the flames, Beowulf's face could still be discerned for a few heartbeats. Distorted by the heat, half-hidden by smoke, yet still there. No halos, no golden rims. Just that stubborn, frozen expression he had often worn in life when he had decided he was right, regardless of what anyone else said.

Then a thicker cloud of smoke drifted over it, black and heavy, and when it dissipated, there was only something dark left that no longer had any clear contours.

"That's it then," thought Wigstan. "The moment when a man becomes a pile."

Some began to cry. Not loudly, not theatrical tears. That quiet, ugly crying where the shoulders shrug and the throat makes sounds that never finish. A few of the men wiped their faces with the backs of their hands, pretending it was just smoke.

A boy – too young to really understand – asked his mother in a high, thin voice: “Does it still hurt him?”

The woman hesitated, searching for an answer that wasn't awful. "No," she finally said. "This is just for us now."

Wigstan heard that and thought: Exactly. For us. The reckoning. The stage set. All of this wasn't for the man up there. He was finished. This was for everyone down here who wanted to know what it looks like when someone doesn't get up in the end.

The wind shifted slightly and hurled a full blast of smoke in their faces. A few people stepped back, throwing up their coats; others stood frozen. The smoke tasted of pitch, wood, old iron, burnt hair, and something sweet that no one wanted ever to taste again.

Wulfgar coughed, wiped his mouth, then looked at his hand. No blood. Only soot.

"Lucky me," he muttered. "At least today."

Wigstan felt as if the smoke were eating into his skin within seconds. He knew: It wouldn't go away. You could bathe, you could rub yourself in the river, you could wrap yourself in herbs—the smell would remain. In your hair. In your clothes. In your memories. Dragon Hill had left its mark on them all. And now the king was adding his.

"How do you burn a king?" one could have asked him.

He would have replied: “Exactly. With the same fire you use to burn everything else. The only difference is how you breathe afterwards.”

The flames were now so high that the top of the pile was almost completely obscured. Sparks rose, heavy and glowing, carried away by the wind before they could fall. A few landed on coats, on hair, and were hastily beaten out.

"Be careful," one of them shouted under his breath. "We don't want the king to infect us even in death."

It was a terrible joke. A few people laughed anyway. Nervously, briefly.

"Better than if everyone stood here and pretended it was sacred," thought Wulfgar. "This is violence. Just quieter violence."

The priest took a step closer to the mound, raised his staff slightly, but still said nothing. Perhaps he had finally realized that his gods were no more visible in the smoke than their king.

The healer beside Wigstan watched the flames with the same dispassionate gaze she usually used to examine wounds. "He's burning well," she said matter-of-factly. "The heat is spreading evenly."

Wigstan looked at her as if she had just punched him in the face. "Is that... a consolation?"

She shrugged. "It's better than if the fire stalls and he's half burned, half left lying there. Believe me. I've seen funeral pyres where, in the end, you couldn't tell if the dead person was still there or not. This is... cleaner."

“Cleaner,” he repeated, and had to laugh. It sounded crazy. “Everything about that word is wrong these days.”

The minutes dragged on. Part of the pile had already turned into a glowing skeleton. The large trunks crackled, bark peeled off, falling into the embers below. You could see something black collapsing in on itself amid the flames, bones, flesh, and hides becoming a formless mass that still somehow hinted at the shape of a human being.

Wulfgar thought of all the nights Beowulf had sat beside him by the fire. How he had drunk mead, squeezed out stories, swallowed curses. How sometimes he had sat there silently, his eyes in shadow, and you couldn't tell if he was lost in old battles or simply lost in thought.

"You were a damned bastard," he thought. "And I'll miss you. Both are possible at the same time, even if the books of gods don't have a word for it."

A section of the pile collapsed, an entire beam caved in. Sparks exploded, the flames leaped higher, as if to demonstrate their power one last time.

Wigstan took a step back. He felt dizzy. Not just from the heat. The image of what lay above was gnawing through the herbs in his mind.

"Go away a little," the healer said softly. "You don't have to stand here until the very last spark."

“I… I don’t know where else to go,” he murmured.

"That's the trick," said Wulfgar. "You can leave without knowing where you're going. The main thing is that your feet are moving."

He took a few steps to the side, not far, but enough so the smoke no longer directly choked him. From there, the pile looked smaller. The king at the top was now just one of many dark lumps in the fire. Part of something bigger.

"This is how it ends," thought Wigstan. "Not with a crown, not with a final battle cry. With a pile of wood and a smell that no one wants to describe."

After a while—no one knew exactly how long, because time refuses to run normally at such funerals—it was clear that the main part was over. The flames grew lower. The large pieces of wood were now just glowing skeletons. The smoke became thinner, grayer.

What remained was an ugly, glowing wound in the ground. Black trunks, white and grey patches in between, which looked as if they still had a form that the wind would soon erase.

"Let it burn out," said the healer. "No one goes in there now. Not for the ash, not for the bones, not for the gold. Anyone who pokes around too soon will get the rest of the fire on them."

People began to disperse. Not with a command, not in ranks. In small groups. Someone who realized they couldn't stand any longer would leave. Women pulled away children who had stared for too long. Men, wanting to appear strong, pretended they had to attend to something.

The priest remained, his gaze fixed on the embers, as if waiting to see if one of his gods would play a trick in the ashes.

Wulfgar stayed too. Wigstan stayed, but kept his distance. They were too deeply entangled in the story to simply return to the hall now and pretend it was just another burned body.

“Do you know what’s so bad?” Wigstan asked after a long time of just staring as flames turned into embers.

"Tell me," murmured Wulfgar.

“I can’t even piece it all together in my head anymore,” Wigstan said. “How he was lying there before we carried him out. How he looked in the cave. It’s all blurred. And I was damn well there.”

Wulfgar nodded slowly. "That's how it works," he said. "First it stinks, then it burns, then an image remains. And the image begins to lie, even if you don't want it to."

He looked into the embers, where bones lay scattered about, bones that no one could properly identify anymore. King, warrior, wood – all a heap.

“Tomorrow,” said Wulfgar, “they will start talking about ashes and signs and divine omens. About smoke that was somehow shaped, about birds that flew in strange circles. Today there is only heat and stench. That is the most honest part.”

Wigstan coughed again, this time shorter but hard. No more blood was visible, only dark mucus.

"You can't just cough up blood," he thought again. "But eventually it will lessen. And then the stories will come."

Beowulf's funeral pyre crackled and collapsed, slowly becoming what everyone would most like: ashes. Something to scatter, bury, put in urns, and throw into the river with portentous expressions.

Ashes in the wind, gold in the dust.

Wulfgar lightly patted Wigstan on the upper arm with his good hand. "Come," he said. "We'll let it finish glowing. The rest belongs to the wind. And the gold out there under the hill is already looking for new greedy ones."

They turned around and took a few steps away from the embers. Their backs were warm, their faces cold from the wind. Behind them, what remained to burn was still burning. Before them lay a land that had to pretend once again that life could simply go on there.

They had learned how to burn a king. Whether they could handle it was another matter. That would only be determined when the ashes were cold and the first hands groped through the dust for glistening remains.

CHAPTER 32 – Ashes in the Wind, Gold in the Dust

The morning, when the ashes were cold, felt like a bad hangover without the consolation of knowing that somewhere half a cup was still waiting for you. The embers had burned all night, growing smaller, closer together, until only a messy patch of gray, black, and dull red remained. No sacred glow, no divine sign. Just dirt that had once burned.

Wigstan stood at the edge of the fire and felt the wind blow fine dust particles into his face. It was no longer the intense heat of yesterday, just a dry warmth rising from the ground like a final, weary curse. He sucked in the air. It tasted of cold smoke and that metallic residue that always lingers when too much blood has been spilled in the area.

"Not too close," said the healer behind him, even though he was already keeping his distance as if the pile could explode again at any moment. "There are still embers underneath. They just like to disguise themselves as dust."

He nodded, yet took a half step forward. Curiosity was stronger than instinct. He wanted to see it. The end. Not yesterday's firework display, not the sparks, not the "oohs" and "aahs" of the crowd. The rest. What remains when the smoke clears and no one can pretend it was beautiful anymore.

The ashes lay unevenly. Patches where beams had once been. A few charred shield edges, half-submerged in the embers, half-still visible. And in between, bright spots where the wind had played. Wigstan knew what they must be. Bones. Perhaps. Or perhaps just particularly baked wood. His head said one thing, his stomach another.

Wulfgar stood a little further to the left, his arms folded, his burned forearm in a sling someone had made from an old belt. He looked as if he hadn't slept properly for two nights, but that was nothing new for him.

"Looks smaller than he was," he murmured.

“What?” Wigstan asked.

"The pile," said Wulfgar. "The ashes. Him. Everything."

Wigstan examined the burn mark. If one hadn't known what had happened here yesterday, one could have said: A large tree fell, it was burned, end of story. Nothing about this remains screamed: A king lay here.

“Perhaps that’s the most honest thing,” he said quietly. “That in the end you look just like everyone else they burned in the yard fire.”

“They’ll make a hill out of it,” Wulfgar said. “They’ll haul stones, pile up wood, sweep the area around it clean. And then it’ll look like something special happened here again.”

“It is,” Wigstan murmured.

“For us,” said Wulfgar. “For the others, it’s one more reason to get drunk, dance around, and feel important.”

He bent down carefully, as far as his back allowed, and with two fingers lifted a small piece of something from the ashes. It was black, light, porous. Perhaps wood, perhaps bone. Perhaps a mixture of both.

“What are you doing?” Wigstan asked.

“I’m just looking,” said Wulfgar. “That’s all. I don’t want to make a holy relic out of it. I just want to know what it feels like to be a king when he’s finished.”

He rubbed the piece between his thumb and forefinger. It crumbled, becoming fine dust that was carried away by the next gust of wind.

“That’s how it feels,” he said.

The priest came up the slope, heavy as if someone had sewn stones into his robe. His staff tapped on the ground in time with his steps. He stopped at the edge and wore a expression somewhere between awe and weariness.

“We should collect something,” he said. “For the mound. For the urn. For…”

"For those who need something to kneel before," Wulfgar interrupted. "Of course."

The priest accepted the statement. "They need a place," he said calmly. "A place they can go when they don't know what to do. When the winter gets harsh. When the children are sick. When they want someone they can blame for everything being the way it is."

"One stone would have been enough," muttered Wulfgar.

"A stone doesn't speak," said the priest. "A king does. Even dead. At least in their minds."

Wigstan looked at them both. "And what about what isn't here?" he asked. "What lies beneath the hill? The gold? The..."

He broke off. The word "dragon" was on the tip of his tongue, still tasting of burnt air.

The priest looked at the steaming hill in the distance. The smoke had lessened, but it was still clear that something too large to simply vanish had died down there.

“They’ll be fighting over this,” he said. “Gold has its own religion. We god-men are just extras in it.”

Wulfgar spat in the dust. "They've already started," he said. "Last night. When we got back and the first ones had howled themselves up enough courage. 'The gold belongs to the people.' 'The gold belongs to the king, so the next one.' 'The gold belongs to the gods, we have to bury it.' Everyone has a nice line. Nobody wants to stick their own head in the cave."

Wigstan felt something tighten in his chest, without coughing. The image of the cave returned. The belly. The gold beneath the claws. The feeling that the air in there wasn't meant for humans.

"Leave it there," he murmured. It was half thought, half plea. "Leave it in the dirt. Leave it lying underneath him."

The healer gave a dry laugh. "As long as it glitters, no one will leave it alone," she said. "Gold in the dust is like an open jug of mead in a room full of drunks. Eventually, someone will reach for it."

The priest nodded slowly. "They will say it is a sin to take a dragon's treasure," he said. "And then they will find ways to call the sin something else."

Wulfgar stretched out his burned arm a little, as if he wanted to wave it in the air. "I have no interest in crawling back into that cave," he said. "Not even for a mountain of shields that aren't dented and mead that never runs out. The Hill can keep it all. It's earned it honestly."

Wigstan knew that wouldn't be enough. Honesty had never been much of a match for greed.

The first scouts came up the path, men who, on the day after such a fire, did what they always did: look at what was left. One reported on the fields, another on a herd that stood half-burned, half-disoriented in a valley.

“The people down below are starting to ask questions,” said one who looked as if he hadn’t stopped talking since yesterday. “Who’s in charge? Who decides? Who says what happens to the ashes? To the gold? To the fields? To… everything?”

He looked back and forth between Wulfgar and Wigstan.

“Not me,” Wigstan said reflexively.

“Neither does he,” said Wulfgar, pointing his chin at the priest. “He’s responsible for the invisible things. We’re talking about very visible problems.”

The priest accepted it. "The hall needs a master," he said dryly. "So does the country. You can stand up here by the ashes and philosophize as long as you like. Down below, everyday life is starting to clear its throat."

Wigstan thought of Beowulf's line: You will either become king or drown somewhere drunk. At the moment, both felt equally far away and equally close.

"Let them pick someone who still has both arms and doesn't cough," he muttered.

"They'll still look at you," said Wulfgar. "You're the one who was in the belly. The one who came out. The one who told the truth by the fire. You can't get something like that off you, no matter how much you wash yourself in the river."

The wind rustled through the ash again, carrying a small plume of it with it. It drifted across the ground, over Wulfgar's boots, over Wigstan's feet, further down the slope.

“There,” said the healer. “There he goes. A little bit. The rest remains. In crevices. Inside us.”

“How much of it is wind and how much is dirt?” Wigstan asked.

"It's the same for everyone," she said. "Some like to tell each other that their dead live in the clouds. In reality, they lie in the wood, in the ground, in the clothes, in the lungs of those who were standing nearby. The rest is just stories."

“And gold,” Wulfgar added. “Don’t forget the gold.”

The priest sighed. "You must decide," he said. "At least for the first few days. Will the ashes be collected and carried to a hilltop? Will they remain here, and we simply surround them with stones? Will that hill over there be declared a sanctuary or a cursed place? They are simple questions. The answers will be complicated. As always."

Wigstan stared at the scene of the fire until his eyes burned.

"Gather a little," he said finally. "Not everything. Just as much as fits in one hand. Make something out of it that they can stand around when they want to talk. The rest stays here where it's burned. And nobody goes into the mound while it's still steaming. Anyone who's too greedy can go alone."

Wulfgar looked at him. "Well, look at that," he muttered. "The boy is starting to speak in sentences."

“I am not a king,” Wigstan snapped at him, faster, harder than he wanted. “I have no right…”

“Right is just talk,” Wulfgar interrupted. “You were there where none of them were. That’s the whole difference. That’s all it takes these days to have a voice. Whether you like it or not.”

Down below, by the hall, people moved like ants. Wood was stacked, not for fires, but for everyday needs. Cattle were herded together, children were bossed around, water was fetched. Life, that stubborn beast, did what it always did: simply carry on.

Ashes in the wind, gold in the dust, thought Wigstan. In between, a bunch of people trying to make something out of both that won't immediately crumble away.

He coughed again. It hurt, but he stayed standing. The wind whistled across the burnt area, carrying away a few more grains of smoke.

"Good," Wulfgar finally said. "Then we'll collect a little. Not too much, so that no one gets any stupid ideas."

"And then?" Wigstan asked.

“Then,” said Wulfgar, “we will go down and pretend that we can explain to them how to live in a country where the king hangs in the smoke and the dragon lies in the ground.”

He didn't sound convinced. But he set off.

Wigstan stood still for a moment, watching the wind play with the ash as if it were just another piece of dust that could be blown across a field.

"If you are anywhere," he thought towards the burn mark, "it's more likely here than in the sky. In the dust. In the air. In my lungs."

Then he turned around and followed the others down the slope. Behind him remained the site of the fire, a dark stain on the land, which once again acted as if everything belonged only to those who would get entangled in it.

Down by the hall, the air smelled of everyday life again, but of someone who still had blood under their fingernails. Smoke rose from the hearth, but no longer full of pathos like yesterday, but as always: wood, fat, a pot in which something was simmering that would ultimately leave half of them dissatisfied.

Wigstan stumbled after Wulfgar, down the slope as if he were taking a staircase whose steps weren't where they should be. His shoulder burned, his cough was as deep as a stone embedded in the ground. With every breath, he felt that fine dust from the funeral pyre stirring within him.

“They’re already staring,” Wulfgar murmured, without turning around.

Wigstan noticed it. The stares that clung to him like burrs to an old coat. He used to be one of many. One who had cleaned shields in the shadows, carried weapons, chopped wood. Now this invisible sign clung to him: He'd been in the gut. He'd survived. He'd have a story to tell.

A small group had gathered in front of the hall, half in an organized fashion, half by chance. A few of the older men, who had worn their offices like old coats for years. Farmers whose faces looked as if they had seen too much winter. Two or three of those who were paid to talk, not to fight. And in between, those who are always there when a decision is made, so they can later claim they were "there from the beginning."

“Here they come,” said one. “The dog and the boy.”

Wulfgar stopped, slowly turned his head, as if he had to check whether he was being addressed or whether the sentence might belong to someone else.

“I haven’t heard ‘dog’ in a long time,” he said. “It’s almost like a declaration of love.”

A gray-bearded man, who had once carried weapons and now juggled words and jugs, stepped forward. "We need to talk," he said, and one could hear that he was happy to say it.

“Speak up,” Wulfgar replied. “Your mouths obviously still work.”

“Not like that,” interjected the priest who had followed them. “Not more mockery. There have been enough hurt feelings.”

The gray-bearded man raised his hands as if to buy peace. "No one here wants to fight," he asserted, sounding like someone who had thrived on conflict his entire life. "The country needs clarity. The king is dead. The ashes..." he gestured vaguely up the hillside, "...are still warm. The people are unsettled. They ask: Who will lead us? Who will decide about the treasure in the mound? Who will determine whether we go there or avoid it?"

"Perhaps we should start with the fields," Wulfgar murmured. "The treasure won't rot. The seeds will."

“The fields are important,” the man admitted. “But…”

This "but" hung in the air like a bad knife.

“…but gold shines brighter,” Wulfgar finished for him. “I know that feeling. I’ve listened to many who said ‘but’ just before they ran into some kind of shit.”

Wigstan stood beside him, feeling the weariness gnawing at him. He was too overwhelmed by images, noise, and stench. Now they stood there, pretending that words could hold together a country that had been burning just yesterday.

"What do you want?" he asked directly, without beating around the bush. "Just say it. I don't have enough breath left for games."

A younger man, cleaner, more groomed, probably one of those who spent more time with bills than with axes, stepped forward. “The hill,” he said. “The gold. The weapons. Whatever the dragon has seized. It is… a lot. Our ancestors would have said: A royal prerogative. The new people say: It belongs to those who live and suffer. We are caught in between. And you…” he looked at Wigstan, “…were in there. You saw what’s down there.”

Wigstan closed his eyes briefly. Before his inner vision, the gold flickered again, lying like a mockery beneath the dragon's body. Not beautiful. Not radiant. More like a greasy disease that glistens.

“There is enough gold,” he said slowly, “to ruin entire villages. Not to save them. To ruin them.”

A murmur. Nobody wanted to hear that. Gold was supposed to solve problems, not create new ones.

"What do you mean?" asked the priest.

“If you give a hungry person too much food, they’ll eat themselves sick,” said Wigstan. “If you suddenly throw a mountain of gold at a fearful country, they’ll first fight over it, then measure themselves against it, then die from it. Everyone will say they need more because their suffering was greater. And if anyone tries to say, ‘Leave it, we had enough fire,’ they’ll be pushed away like a drunkard at a barrel.”

The gray-bearded man snorted. "So we're just supposed to leave a dragon's treasure buried in the ground?" he asked incredulously. "As if nothing had happened?"

"That was enough," Wulfgar said sharply. "More than enough."

Another man, with a narrow face and sharp eyes, intervened. "We could take half," he suggested. "Leave the rest. For the gods. For..."

“…for a clear conscience,” Wulfgar interrupted. “Half a poison is still poison. And you don’t seriously believe they’ll stop after half. If someone enters the cave and comes out alive, that’s

the new standard. Then the next generation will rush into the mountain, thinking they can die better than the ones before them."

Wigstan felt something tighten inside him. The thought of them wanting to go back in there – with ropes, with sacks, with greed in their eyes – frightened him more than the dragon in its prime.

"Whoever wants to go in," he said quietly, "should go alone. Without men, without banners, without any claim. And come out alone again. If they manage it. But don't call that service to the people. Call it what it is: greed."

Some lowered their gaze. Others blushed, not from the cold.

"And the king?" asked a voice from the crowd. A woman, her shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders, her eyes weeping through too many nights. "Who will take his place? We can't live on ashes alone. We need someone we can tell it's their fault if everything goes wrong."

Wulfgar grinned wearily. "Finally, someone's saying it honestly."

The gray-bearded man cleared his throat importantly. "There are... possibilities," he began, and the very word made it clear that he considered himself one of those possibilities. "Bloodlines, kinship, ancient rights..."

"Old rights," Wulfgar repeated. "Old rights have brought you to the point where a half-rusted old man had to climb into the belly of a kite because none of you could say in time: 'Maybe we'll do something differently.' I can write your rights on the cinder pitch, and the wind will make something beautiful out of them."

Their eyes turned to Wigstan. Again. Over and over again.

"No," he said immediately.

"You don't even know what we wanted to ask," said the slim computer.

"Yes," said Wigstan. "You want to know if you can use my name to upholster your chairs. 'The one who was in the dragon said…', 'Wigstan thinks…', 'The dragon-slayer boy is behind us.' And I'm telling you right now: Let me out of there. I can barely stand. I'm coughing up blood. I have enough trouble just surviving my nights. I don't want your power games in my head too."

Silence. A short, harsh silence.

The priest looked at him appraisingly. "And what if the country wants someone who was actually there where it burned?" he asked calmly. "What if they don't accept someone else?"

"Then let them hate me," said Wigstan. "I prefer that to them putting me in a chair that I'm stuck to until I'm as old as him and just as much no longer remember what the original idea was."

Wulfgar gave a hollow laugh. "Can you hear yourself? You're already talking like someone who's seen too much."

“I have,” said Wigstan.

The wind swept through the yard, stirring up a few dust motes – ash from the hillside, dirt, straw. It was as if the pyre were spitting at them.

"Perhaps the country doesn't need a new king right now," Wulfgar said suddenly, and everyone turned to him. "Perhaps it needs peace and quiet. Some counsel. A few people to keep each other in check if someone gets too carried away. Someone who understands fields. Someone who knows what blood sounds like. Someone who can pray when no one else can. And a few who are too stupid to take themselves too seriously."

"Any advice?" asked the grey-bearded man skeptically, as if Wulfgar had just suggested that cows should be tied to trees.

“Yes,” said Wulfgar. “A bunch. Just like us. Only with less fire and more squabbling. You can’t accomplish anything else on your own anyway. Why should the crown be any different?”

The priest pondered this. It was evident in his face. "It would be... unusual," he said. "But not inconceivable. At least for a while."

"Call it what you like," said Wulfgar. "Transition. Trial. Experiment by the gods. I don't care. The main thing is that no one puts a crown on the head of a boy coughing up blood and calls it 'destiny'."

A few heads nodded, cautiously. Uncertainty spread through the rows like a new kind of wind.

"And who sits on this council?" asked the computer. "You?"

Wulfgar shrugged his good shoulder. "If need be. I can grumble, drink, and fight. That seems appropriate for gatherings like this. The healer here," he nodded to the woman with the gray streaks, "knows more about how men really end up than all of you put together. She should be here. The priest, so someone keeps an eye on the gods, in case they do show up. One of you peasants who talks not just about tithes and camps, but about dirt under your fingernails. And maybe," he glanced briefly at Wigstan, "maybe you will be here someday, too. If you can stop coughing without the world going black."

“I said no,” Wigstan growled.

“I said ‘someday’,” Wulfgar replied. “Not today. Today you’re just the one who knows what it was like. That’s enough. More is too much for one day.”

The healer nodded. "A sult is like a poorly healed wound," she said. "It looks ugly at first, hurts, itches. But sometimes it's better than stitching it up again right away just so it looks neat. Leave it open until you're sure how you want it to grow."

The priest looked around. "They will grumble," he said. "Those out there. Those who are used to kings. But perhaps it's time they learned that there isn't always someone there to hang alone when things go wrong."

The gray-bearded man looked as if someone had stolen his best excuse for the rest of his life. The computer was already secretly calculating how he could get the most out of such a council meeting.

Wigstan breathed heavily. The words swirled around him like flies. Council, king, gold, ashes. All concepts that hadn't hurt so much yesterday.

"What about him?" a quiet voice suddenly asked. A boy, no older than twelve, had crept closer. "With Beowulf? Where is he now?"

Everyone fell silent for a moment, as if they had forgotten that children ask questions that overwhelm all the beautiful theory.

The priest took a breath to speak of halls in heaven, of gods who offer jugs. Wulfgar raised his hand.

“He?” he said. “Partly in the wind, partly in the ashes, partly in our minds. He’s there when you wake up at night thinking you hear a roar outside. He’s there when someone by the fire says, ‘Do you remember?’ and everyone suddenly falls silent. He’s there when you see gold and wonder if you want to become like the dragon. Let the gods sort out where they put him. We have enough to deal with with what he left behind.”

The boy nodded slowly. It wasn't an answer that could be stitched down. But it suited the smell in the air better.

Ashes in the wind, gold in the dust.

The council—or what was to become one—began to take shape like a dark spot in the air, not yet clearly visible. Wigstan knew that this was only the beginning of another struggle: the struggle for stories, for power, for guilt.

He coughed again, short and dry, and felt something heavy settle inside him: not just the dust, not just the blood. Responsibility. A word he had never wanted, but which now sat in his chest nonetheless, as if the dragon had laid an egg in it as he died.

“Come on,” said Wulfgar, tapping him on the elbow. “We need to talk before they start thinking too much for themselves. That never ends well.”

Wigstan could have laughed if his lungs had allowed him the time. Instead, he just nodded and went along.

Behind them lay the slope with the site of the fire. In front of them was a hall that reeked of smoke, mead, and questions.

Ashes in the wind, gold in the dust, and in the middle of it all a few people who acted as if they could build something out of all that wouldn't immediately collapse in on itself.

What eventually came to be called the "Council" began like everything else here: as a makeshift solution in a crooked hall with too much smoke and too little air. No grand moment, no solemn announcement. More like a bunch of people too tired to run away when they were herded into the center.

They had cleared a long table, not the one where Beowulf usually sat. That one remained empty, as if reserving a place for a ghost. They took the crooked bench near the fire, where the old dogs of the troop usually sat, those no longer allowed into battle but still permitted a drink. It was fitting.

Wulfgar sat at one end, his burned arm resting on the table like a scrawny dog he'd picked up somewhere. Beside him was the healer, her hands folded, her shoulders straight as if supporting half the hall. The priest sat opposite them, his staff leaning beside him, as if to demonstrate that he would, for once, not use it as a weapon.

Wigstan was given a seat not directly in the middle, but close enough that no one could pretend he was just decoration. He sat down carefully, his shoulder against the rough wood. Every breath reminded him how little space his lungs had left.

In addition, there was a farmer with hands like shovels and a face like a washed-out rock, a merchant with overly alert eyes and a well-groomed beard, and the gray-bearded chatterer from before, who of course hadn't missed the opportunity to play "the voice of the old retinue".

Outside, the village was working. Inside, the air was working.

"So," said Wulfgar, after they had just stared around the table for a while. "Here we are. Those of us who had the misfortune of not being far enough away when the proposal to join the council came."

The farmer snorted. "I don't have time for scholarly nonsense," he grumbled. "Out there are fields waiting that don't know you're all spouting important pronouncements."

"That's exactly why you're here," said Wulfgar. "So that there's someone in the room who smells of dirt and not mead and paper."

The merchant pressed his fingertips together. "We need order," he said. "Otherwise, the next winter will devour us. Gold, grain, taxes, weapons, roads..."

“Don’t start with the gold,” Wigstan interrupted before he could stop himself. His voice was harsher than he had intended. “Not today. Not right away. Otherwise, we’ll get all worked up and no one will remember that the children outside could go hungry, no matter how much metal is in the mountain.”

The priest nodded. "There is a sequence," he murmured. "Meat, bread, warmth. Then the gods. Then the gold. If we reverse that, we'll soon no longer need rituals. Only graves."

The gray-bearded man licked his lips, like someone eager to get down to business but realizing that doing so might make him unpopular. "You start," he said to Wulfgar. "You knew him. You know what he would have wanted."

Wulfgar gave a short, dry laugh. "He would have wanted us not to throw away everything he painstakingly held together," he said. "And at the same time, he would have wanted us not to cling to his name like children to a warm blanket. So, we're not doing 'What would Beowulf have done?' We're doing 'What don't we want to regret when we're sitting in a corner dying later?'"

The healer nodded. "Start with the living," she said. "Who needs what? Who is cold? Who has nothing to eat? Who has too many dead people in their house to even be able to work? If we don't see them before we see the hill, we've forfeited our right to any funeral pyre."

The farmer frowned, relieved that the discussion concerned something he recognized. “We have scorched patches in the fields,” he said. “Some areas are only blackened on the surface; there’s still life underneath. We need hands to pull away the ash, to loosen the soil. We still have seeds, but not indefinitely. If next spring comes and we’re still talking about gold, we’ll starve in a field full of fine plans.”

"Good," said Wulfgar. "So: Fields first. We're not sending the same ones who were in the fire yesterday. They need to learn how to sleep properly again first. Others have to step in. Those who were held back in the fight. Those who were too old or too young for the dragon."

The trader nodded slowly. "And we have to distribute what's left," he said. "Grain, meat, salt. Not just according to rank, but according to... damage."

“After damage,” Wigstan repeated, and he liked the word. “Those whose farms have burned down can’t buy anything with the fact that their great-grandfather once drank next to Beowulf.”

The gray-bearded man grimaced. "Tradition..." he began.

“…is not bread,” the healer interrupted. “No child chews on tradition and gets full from it. You can talk about old rights later. Today, those who otherwise wouldn't see the light of day again this winter get something first.”

The discussion continued. Names were mentioned, villages that had suffered more than others. Roads that were still passable, barrels that hadn't yet been emptied, supplies that hadn't yet been plundered. Wigstan listened, interjecting only when someone started talking too far away from the smoke again. It was strange: he, who had never had anything to do with grand plans, was suddenly one of those who said, "No, that's not how it was" or "It's worse up there than on your paper."

Eventually, they reached the hill. It was inevitable. Gold had patience, but people's thoughts did not.

“We have to make a decision,” the trader said. “If we leave it open, groups will form who think they can do better. And then we'll not only have seen dragonfire, but also a few more nice little civil wars, which will make everything even nicer.”

Wulfgar looked at Wigstan. "Your favorite topic," he said dryly. "The hill."

Wigstan had hoped to avoid it. But the hill was always there in the distance, like a reproachful face in the land.

“I’ll tell you how it felt in there,” he began, and everyone fell silent as if someone had pushed the roof down a crack. “Not like a treasure. Like a disease. Imagine you’re standing in a stable and there’s a swollen, stinking animal lying there, unable to move from eating so much. And underneath it is a pile of feed. You know that if you pull it out, it won’t get better. There will only be more stench. That’s what this gold is like.”

"Gold can be melted," the computer objected quietly. "Recast. Distributed differently."

"You can put shit in a new container," Wulfgar snarled. "It still stinks."

The priest cleared his throat. "There are old stories," he said. "Of treasures that carry curses. Of gold that has destroyed families. You don't have to believe in gods to see that some things bring more trouble than they are worth."

"So we're just going to leave everything as it is?" The gray-bearded man was stunned. "We're just going to pretend the dragon never lived here?"

“No,” said Wigstan. “We’re pretending we’ve learned from it. That’s a difference.”

The healer looked at him as if he had just described a wound she knew. "Perhaps," she said slowly, "we need something to remind us that we can also say no. Most disasters happen because no one says no when something glitters."

Wulfgar drummed the knuckles of his good hand on the table. "My proposal," he said. "We declare the hill a forbidden place. Not because it's sacred, but because it almost killed us. No entrance, no ropes, no glorious raids. Anyone who goes anyway goes alone. Without banners. Without claim. And if they return with gold, it doesn't automatically belong to them or the people. Then we'll talk again. And whoever stays inside has become their own dragon. I won't mourn their loss."

It was brutal. It was clear. It was the first time in days that Wigstan felt someone was speaking a language that even the hill could understand.

The farmer raised his hand, hesitantly. "And what if winter kicks us so hard that we have no choice?" he asked. "What if children die and the fields yield nothing? Should we still say, 'The hill is off-limits'?"

The sentence hung in the room like a knife over the door.

“Then,” Wulfgar said slowly, “we’ll look at it and ask ourselves if we’ve really fallen so low that we’d rather suffocate in gold than fight in the dirt. Then we’ll decide again. But not today. Not out of greed. Only if there’s no other door left.”

The priest nodded. “The gods,” he said, and everyone groaned inwardly, “…will be silent. They often do. What we do, we do. Today we say no. That is also a form of prayer. Perhaps the only one that gets through.”

The trader looked displeased, but he nodded. He was smart enough to know that you couldn't argue with a hill that had just stopped smoking.

Wigstan noticed his hands were trembling. Not just from coughing. But from the realization that they were deciding on something bigger than rations and feeding plans. They were saying no to a mountain. Perhaps for the first time in the history of this country, no one had said, "There's something glittering there, bring it down."

"Good," Wulfgar finally said. "Fields first. Bellies, roofs. Then the hill: taboo, until we are so desperate that we would devour our own dignity. And the king..."

He broke off. No one wanted to finish speaking.

"The king is ashes," the healer said matter-of-factly. "He'll get his mound. A small one. Here, not back there. With some of that dust. So people know where to go if they want to talk to someone who doesn't answer. Everything else... we'll see."

The priest rose slowly, as if his bones hadn't recovered well from the night. "I will tell the people there will be a time of council," he said. "No crown. Not yet. Perhaps one that looks different than before. Perhaps none at all. The gods will..."

"…shut up, hopefully," Wulfgar added.

A tired, genuine laugh rippled around the table. Brief, but genuine.

Wigstan stood up. Too quickly. His vision went black for a moment, and he heard a ringing in his ears. He held onto the table, breathing shallowly until the world regained its shape.

"I... I need to get out," he muttered. "A little bit of air that doesn't come from a pyre."

Nobody stopped him.

Outside, the wind was viciously clear. It cut into his lungs, made his cough worse, but at least it didn't smell of a burnt king. Only of earth, ash, and a cold day. Wigstan leaned against a post, feeling his body protest softly at being used again.

Ashes in the wind, gold in the dust, council in a crooked hall. A dead king, a forbidden hill, a young man who coughed blood and suddenly had a voice.

Somewhere in the hall, someone would soon strike the first notes. Someone who earned his living by squeezing all of this into melodies that were too long and too beautiful to be honest.

Songs would come. They always did. About kings, dragons, gods, gold. About courage and glory and endless nonsense.

Wigstan wondered how many of them would tell stories that the man up there had never heard.

He coughed. Spit dark phlegm into the yard. Wiped his mouth.

"Sing what you want," he thought to himself, looking towards the invisible bards. "I'll keep my own version. For those who can handle it."

Above him, the wind rattled the roof beams. In the distance, a swarm of ash drifted across the sky. And somewhere inside, someone was surely already reaching for their lyre.

The songs would come. But the one they were about was long gone, where words were nothing but dust in the wind.

CHAPTER 33 – Songs for One Who Can't Hear It

It wasn't even two days before the first ones arrived with their lyres. That's how it goes: no sooner has the blood half-dried than those appear who can do nothing but arrange words, while others try to stuff their guts back where they belong.

The man who stood in front of the fire wasn't one of the very young ones. The young ones sing differently, too fast, too shrill, as if they were afraid someone would snatch their cup before they'd finished. This one already had wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and a voice that betrayed the fact it had shouted over the noise of drunken men on too many nights.

He sat down on the stool, placed the lyre in his lap, and strummed the strings once. A dissonant sound, but one that nonetheless turned all heads in his direction. The hall was full, but not loud. Full halls that are silent are worse than empty ones. All the noise is trapped inside the people and can't get out.

Wigstan stood against the wall, close to the door that pretended to be an escape route. He had been on his way out when he heard the first sound. Something inside him wanted to move on. Away. No songs. No packaged truths. Enough sounds for ten lifetimes. But another part of him remained stuck, like a shoe in deep mud.

Wulfgar was already seated on his bench, his back to the post, his face in the half-darkness. His burned arm lay on the table, wrapped in a piece of cloth that had once been white. With his other hand he held a cup that was half full, half empty, depending on how you looked at it.

“Well,” he muttered when he saw Wigstan, “I told you so. It doesn’t take long before someone thinks they have to give the whole thing a melody.”

“I have no patience for songs,” Wigstan growled, but his feet still carried him closer to the fire as the bard began.

The strings sounded cleaner now, as if the man had smoothed away their resistance. He cleared his throat, took a breath, looked across the hall, lingering a fraction too long on the empty spot where the king had once sat.

“He’s starting with the wrong thing,” Wigstan thought. “He’s starting with what’s missing.”

“Listen,” the man began, and that word alone already contained too much theatricality. “Listen to the man who was stronger than storm and battle, who cast down the monster’s arm in this hall, and whose name will still be remembered in a hundred winters—”

“If you say ‘klingen’, I’ll kick the lyre out of your hand,” Wulfgar murmured so quietly that only Wigstan heard it.

The bard said "to resonate." Of course he did. It was like a reflex. Half the songs here were about things that should still "resonate" somewhere in a hundred winters.

Wigstan felt his fingers clench in the fabric of his coat. It wasn't anger, not just that. It was that feeling when someone walks into a room where you're counting your wounds and immediately starts repainting the walls.

The man continued singing. About the young fighter with the swift arms. About the journey across the sea, about halls in foreign lands, about Grendel, the mother, the sword that melted in blood. He conjured images from the air, projecting them before the people's eyes, like placing wooden figures on a child's table. Everything glittered. Even the dirt had a golden edge.

Wigstan listened and realized how two worlds were rubbing against each other in his mind. The one he had lived in – rock, stench, fear, screams – and the one being sung here – clean, rounded, with verse. In the sung version, even the blood was orderly. It flowed at the right moment, in the right image, not as a cough droplet onto a cave wall.

"He's lying," Wigstan whispered.

Wulfgar took a sip. "Of course he's lying," he said. "That's his job."

“But they believe it,” Wigstan objected. He looked at the faces around the fire. They were hanging on to the words like children on a bedtime story. Eyes wide, mouths half-open. Some had even been there themselves when the smoke had cleared from Dragon Hill, but you could see them slowly, inwardly, exchanging their own memory for the new version.

The bard shifted to a new verse. Now came the dragon. "The worm of the hill," he called it, "fire-breath, gold-keeper, curse of the fields." It sounded good. The words meshed together like the teeth of a wheel. He sang of sparks that fell like stars, of a king who laughed when the fire touched him.

“He didn’t laugh,” Wigstan said aloud. It escaped him. A few heads turned in his direction.

The bard fell silent for a moment, his fingers still on the strings. That small, fragile moment before everything collapses.

Wulfgar briefly placed his hand on Wigstan's forearm, not firmly, just lightly. "Let him sing," he said. "It's just one version. Ours stays here," he tapped his chest, "as long as we have enough blood left to remember it."

Wigstan sat down. He realized his legs weren't exactly up to playing the hero of truth anymore. His chest was protesting enough with every breath.

The bard picked up the thread again. Perhaps with a slight tremor, but he sang on. This time a little louder, as if he had to prove that he wouldn't be driven away. He sang of Wigstan, the boy who "fearlessly stepped into the dragon's jaws." Of a "blow that ripped open its belly." Of "gods' hands" that had wielded the blade.

Wigstan could have laughed if it hadn't hurt so much. Without fear. God's hands. In reality, he had stumbled, slipped, fallen. The blade had gone where it belonged, not where some heaven wanted it to go.

A few teenagers around the fire watched him as the verse about him was recited. Their looks were a mixture of awe and envy. A new story was circulating now: the boy who had stood in the belly of the dragon. In a few years, others would be running through the village with wooden swords, pretending to be him. And none of them would hear the cough that rumbled in his chest at night.

"I hate this," he whispered.

“I know,” said Wulfgar. “But song is just an animal. It eats what it can get. If you want it to lie less, you have to throw it something else.”

"How so?" Wigstan felt his throat tighten, not from coughing. "Should I get up and correct every verse? Smash every image? That's what they want. They want to shine, at least in their minds."

Wulfgar looked into the fire. "You don't have to do anything," he said. "Only one thing: Don't forget your version. If someone comes to you and asks what happened, tell them. And if they can't bear it, they can go back to playing the lyre."

The bard had now reached the part where Beowulf died. He paused, strummed the strings, and lowered his voice. The music became solemn.

He sang of a king who "lay peacefully as the flame took his name." Of "gentle herbs" that "bathed pain into peace." Of words to the gods, of a "smile in death."

Wigstan gritted his teeth. He saw the other version: the rattling, the twitching, the rage, the last, weary curse against a sky that hadn't answered. No smile. At most, that crooked grin, just before it was all over, a grin that had contained more defiance than peace.

"You were there," Wulfgar said quietly. "You know it. He doesn't. He has to come up with something people can sleep on."

"And what about me?" Wigstan asked. "What am I supposed to sleep with?"

Wulfgar's mouth twisted. "With the truth," he said. "It's shit, but at least it doesn't bite you from behind at night."

The singing picked up speed. People started nodding along at certain parts, as if they'd known the lyrics for years. It happened quickly. Stories settle in like dirt in crevices: once in, hard to get out.

The bard ended the song with an image of ashes “falling like blessings over the land” and gold “sleeping in the dust until time awakens it.” It was beautiful. It was smooth. It was like a freshly scrubbed table where no one wanted to see the old stains anymore.

As the last note faded, there was a moment of silence. Then came the first "Ha!" from one corner, a murmur of agreement from another. Hands tapped on tables, a few banged their fists against their cups. Someone shouted: "One more!"

"They want seconds," Wulfgar murmured. "Of course they do."

The bard looked around, taking in the faces, the atmosphere. He was a professional. He knew how far he could go.

“There are many songs,” he said. “By him. By you. By us. Today I sang one. Others will follow.”

Wigstan suddenly felt tired to the bone. This song wasn't even bad. It wasn't malicious, not full of deliberate lies. It was just... soft-focus. The edges were missing. The nights. The panic. That feeling in your gut when you think your next breath is your last and nobody noticed.

He stood up, slowly, as if lifting a rock from his lap.

"Where are you going?" asked Wulfgar.

“Take a breath,” said Wigstan. “This one is full of glitter.”

Wulfgar nodded. "Later I'll sing you my version," he murmured. "It has fewer rhymes, but more curses."

“I prefer this,” said Wigstan and went to the door.

Outside it was dark, but more honest. The wind sang its own song, one without meter. The smoke from the fire still hung in the air as a thin veil, but at least it stank as it should.

Wigstan sat down on the step in front of the hall, letting his legs dangle. He heard, muffled through the wood, the next song begin inside, this time an older one about Grendel, in which half the verses consisted of made-up screams.

“Songs for someone who can’t hear them,” he thought. “And for someone who has heard them too well.”

He coughed, spat darkly into the dirt, looked at the stain for a while until the wind half-dried it.

The songs would remain. They had always lasted longer than blood, than smoke, than bones.

The only question was whether there was room somewhere in between for the version that didn't fit on strings.

He sat there for a while, listening to the wind as it swept around the hall and tugged at the edges, as if testing whether the building still had enough bones to survive the next winter. The wood creaked, somewhere inside a cup fell over, muffled laughter drifted through the wall, then singing again. Life inside was like a wound that had been closed too soon: it looked halfway decent from the outside, but underneath it continued to fester.

Wigstan drew his knees up as best he could, given his shoulder. The bandage itched, the cough felt like a grumpy lodger constantly tapping against his ribs. He thought of the song just now. The smooth images. The smile the bard had put in the dying man's mouth.

“If he had heard that,” thought Wigstan, “he would have taken the lyre and struck him over the head with it.”

The door behind him opened, light and noise briefly spilled out, then both diminished again as it half-closed. Wulfgar squeezed through the gap, still holding the goblet. He sat down next to Wigstan on the step, groaning softly as his bones complained about having to change angles yet again.

"Too much glitz for today?" he asked.

“More than enough,” Wigstan muttered. “I feel like I was at my own funeral and someone decided to cut out the embarrassing parts.”

Wulfgar took a sip, grimacing slightly, not because the mead was bad, but because everything tasted wrong at the moment. "That was a harmless version," he said. "Wait until those brats start inventing their own verses in a few years. Then you'll hear what they've made of you."

"From me?" Wigstan laughed dryly, then broke off with a cough. "Back then, I was standing in a hole, half burned, half insane, trying to ram a blade into something soft before the smoke ate me up. In his song, I was a shadow of the gods or some other shitty thing. I don't feel like becoming a saint. Saints always die alone and in stories that aren't true."

Wulfgar leaned the back of his head against the doorframe. "You have no control over it," he said. "Those people in there need their characters. Without them, they can't get the mead down. They sit in the dark at night and need someone to unload their fear on. It used to be Beowulf. Now you're on offer."

Wigstan traced a scratch in the wooden step with his heel, as if doing so could organize his thoughts. "What's on your mind?" he asked after a while. "When you think of him, can you put it into words without it slipping into a song?"

Wulfgar pondered, took another sip as if searching for the right words in the mead. "My version," he finally said, "is ugly and flawed. It has no chorus. When I think of him, I usually don't see him in battle. Instead, I see him in the morning with puffy eyes, trying to shake the rest of the mead out of his head, yet still having to pretend to be a rock in a storm. I see him realizing too late that some peasant brat has been standing in the corner in fear for weeks, because he's supposed to be in the next battle. I see him laughing at things that weren't funny, just so no one notices that sometimes he'd rather run from the hall than make another decision."

Wigstan listened, frowning. These were images that didn't fit with the song that was perhaps already being sung inside.

“In my mind,” he said slowly, “I see him in the fire. Not just with the dragon. But also before it. The way he trudged into every fire as if the heat was the only thing keeping him alive. But I also see him lying there, with that… well… mixture of defiance and weariness on his face. No heroic glimmer. More like, ‘Now it doesn’t matter anymore.’”

Wulfgar nodded. "That's closer to the truth than half the stories they immediately repeat. And yet, at some point, you'll realize that even your version starts to filter out parts. The ones that are too ugly. The ones that are too tedious. The mind can't handle everything. So it sorts things out. That's the point where you have to start distrusting yourself."

"Great," Wigstan muttered. "So first you almost sacrifice your neck for some country, and then you have to live with your own brain starting to lie to you."

“Welcome to the older generation,” said Wulfgar. “We’ve been in this boat for a long time.”

They were silent for a while. Inside, a new song began, this time one from earlier times, from a period when dragons were more rumor than everyday occurrence. It was about Grendel, about the poor, about celebrations, about a hall that had been healed. The voices were louder. The people knew the words.

“Those in there,” said Wigstan, “maybe saw him up close once a year. At the festival. When he was speaking. When he was handing out something. They only know the surface. And now they're getting songs that gild the surface for them. Who's going to tell them about the rest?”

"Maybe you," Wulfgar said.

"And what good does that do?"

Wulfgar shrugged his good shoulder. "Not much. Or everything. Depending on who you catch. It's not about banning the songs. You can't kill them. It's about the fact that somewhere, in some corner, there's someone who knows: That's not quite how it was. Who isn't completely swept up in this glory. He might become another bastard later, when the flames flare up again."

Wigstan thought of the boy earlier who had asked where Beowulf was now. Of the eyes that wanted to know too much. "The kids," he murmured. "They'll grow up with these verses. To them, I'm the guy who jumped into the fire without fear. And if I tell them someday that I almost wet myself with fear, they might laugh. Or they might not believe it."

“Some will laugh,” said Wulfgar. “Some will secretly rejoice because they realize: Ah, so you can be afraid and still do something. Those are the interesting ones. Not the ones who are always clamoring for glamour.”

Wigstan eyed him sideways. "And you? Do you have any songs about yourself?"

Wulfgar snorted. "If anything, it'll be a bad one," he said. "I'm the one who stood beside the king when things got rowdy, and who took his cup away when his tongue got too loose. You don't make a whole ballad out of that. Maybe half a verse in some drinking song, if someone can't remember the verses."

"Do you want more?"

Wulfgar pondered. "For a long time I thought: No. Who needs a horde of drunks singing your name wrong? But now..." He glanced up briefly, to where a wisp of smoke still hung over the hillside. "Now I sometimes think: Maybe a short, off-key verse isn't so bad after all. Not for me. I'll be gone eventually. But for those who should realize that it wasn't just the shining bastard in the middle who was important. But also the one who told him at night to finally go to sleep."

They sat there until the cold seeped into their bones. Wigstan pulled his coat tighter around him, but the cough made it clear that no amount of wool in the world would solve the problem inside.

"Do you know what pisses me off the most?" he asked at some point.

"Tell me," grumbled Wulfgar.

“That he won’t be around to see any of it,” said Wigstan. “The songs, the half-truths, the fighting over the hill, the council, the gold business. His name is flying around here like ashes, and he’s lying somewhere as dust in the ground, never getting another drop of mead. They’ll use him to justify their own numbers, and he won’t even be able to say, ‘Stop using my name for every little thing.’”

Wulfgar nodded slowly. "That's why I told him I'd put a few curses in his mouth for later," he said. "If someone says, 'Beowulf would have wanted…', then I can reply, 'He would have wanted you to keep your mouth shut and plow your field.' It's a lie, but the right kind."

Wigstan's mouth twisted into a crooked grin. "Maybe we should make our own song," he said. "One that's never sung out loud. Only in your head. An anti-ballad. No chorus, no gods, no endless nonsense. Just dirt, pain, a little mead, a few bad jokes."

“Go ahead,” said Wulfgar. “You have the pictures. I have the curses. Together we can put together something that nobody wants to hear. So it’s probably true.”

Inside, the song fell silent. Cheers, clanging of jugs, voices talking over each other. The lyre sang a few loose notes, as if stretching itself.

“They are celebrating him,” said Wigstan. “And they are celebrating themselves for having been there when one of him sang.”

“Let them,” said Wulfgar. “Partying is the only trick we have to keep us from going crazy. If they don’t sing, they start thinking too much. And then maybe at some point they’ll get up and walk up the hill. I prefer the song.”

Wigstan slowly stood up, supporting himself with his good hand. "I'm going in," he said. "I want to see them pretending everything is back to normal."

"And?" asked Wulfgar. "Are you still listening to him?"

"The singer?"

"Yes."

Wigstan thought for a moment. “I’m listening,” he said. “But I don’t believe him. That’s the best compromise I can currently make.”

Wulfgar grinned crookedly. "That's more faith than I'd give most of the others here credit for. Let's go."

They went back into the hall. The smoke hit them, warm, dirty, familiar. The bard was back in his place, lyre on his knees, a new verse on his face. The men and women around the fire had that greedy emptiness in their eyes that said, "Give me another story, I can't stand everyday life."

Wigstan sat down again at the edge, where the shadows were thicker. Not quite in, not quite out. Wulfgar took his place on the bench as if he had never left.

The bard began a new song, this time a quieter one, about echoes and farewells. The first words were as smooth as freshly scraped boards.

Wigstan listened. But another track was running in his head – scratchy, skewed, full of images the singer had never seen. Two versions. One in the hall, one inside.

Songs for someone who can't hear them, he thought. And for those who can't bear to hear them closely.

He coughed softly, tasting that metallic residue again. Then he leaned back and let both versions play over each other – the song the others needed, and the truth that would keep him awake at night.

It dragged on, like everything that hurts and yet doesn't stop just because you're tired. The days after the funeral pyre blended together like spilled mead on an old table. Work in the morning, decisions at midday, songs in the evening. In between, coughs, memories, arguments. The usual stuff when a king is gone and no one really knows whether it's a loss or an opportunity.

The bard stayed. Of course he stayed. Where blood had been spilled, there was enough material for years. He filled the evenings with verses, old, new, half-plagiarized. Sometimes he sang of past battles, as if it were all one long string of heroic deeds with a few insignificant corpses in between. Sometimes he crafted new verses about the dragon, about Beowulf's death, about Wigstan. Each time, the images became smoother. The rough edges disappeared.

Wigstan felt something harden inside him every time his name was mentioned. "Wigstan, the dragon slayer," "Wigstan who stood in the fire," "Wigstan who was guided by gods." It felt as if someone were squeezing his body into a suit of armor made of words that was too tight. One that didn't fit, but gleamed, and people applauded when he could barely move in it.

Once, on one of those evenings when the smoke in the hall hung particularly low, one of the young lads stood before him. Perhaps sixteen, perhaps younger. Too much energy in his arms, too little brains in his eyes, but with that flickering something that one recklessly calls "courage".

"Is that true?" the boy asked directly, without hesitation. "That you didn't flinch when you went into the dragon's belly? That you laughed when it roared above you?"

Wigstan looked at him. Behind the boy stood two others, somewhat older, half excited, half embarrassed, because one of them had asked the question everyone was thinking.

"Who said that?" asked Wigstan.

“He,” the boy nodded toward the fire where the bard was tuning his lyre. “And the others repeated it. And now it is so.”

“Just because someone is singing doesn’t mean it’s true,” Wigstan murmured.

“But they say you’re a hero,” the boy insisted. “And heroes aren’t afraid. Otherwise, they’d be like us.”

Wigstan felt the cough creeping up his chest, like an animal wanting to get out. He swallowed it down, short and hard.

"Sit down," he said, patting the bench next to him with his good hand. The boy hesitated, then sat down. The other two remained standing, as if a seat were some kind of privilege that had to be earned.

“Let me tell you something,” Wigstan began, leaning forward slightly so his words wouldn’t fly too far. “When I went into the dragon’s belly, I didn’t laugh. Not one bit. I was scared stiff. Not just mentally. I thought: If I fall now, no one will find me. I’ll die in the dark, in the stench, and no one will know where my body ends and the beast begins. I was shaking so badly I could barely hold the blade. And yet I still stabbed.”

The boy stared at him. You could see something stirring inside him.

“But… in the song…”

"They have to laugh in the song," said Wigstan. "Otherwise they can't stand it. You'd rather hear about someone laughing than someone almost vomiting. But if you want to know what it was like: It stank. I screamed. I didn't hear God. And when it was over, I coughed up blood and just wanted to get out."

The boy swallowed. "So... you're not a real hero after all?"

Wigstan thought for a moment. “If by ‘hero’ you mean someone who isn’t afraid and does everything with one hand while drinking mead with the other – no. If by ‘hero’ you mean someone who takes the next step even though every fiber of his being is screaming at him to turn back – then maybe. I don’t know. I haven’t had time to think about it.”

The two in the background exchanged glances. You could see something shift. The image in my mind began to crack.

"And Beowulf?" one of them asked. "Wasn't he afraid?"

Wigstan glanced over at the empty space where his seat had once been. It was as if the shadow still sat there, invisible, yet heavy.

“He hid them better than I did,” said Wigstan. “But believe me: no one goes into a cave like that without feeling a surge of fear in their chest. He just decided that his pride would shout louder than his fear. Whether that was clever is another question.”

The boy nodded slowly. It wasn't a gentle nod, more like he had to swallow something that wouldn't quite go down his throat.

"And... if we ever..." He broke off, searched for words, then continued: "If we have to fight... are we allowed to be afraid?"

“You will,” said Wigstan. “Whether you want to or not. The question isn’t whether you’re afraid. The question is whether you let her break you or not. The fact that she’s there just says you’ve realized what’s at stake.”

The boy exhaled as if he had needed that without knowing it beforehand.

"Do you say that in the song too?" he asked quietly.

“No,” said Wigstan. “Nobody hears that in the song. They want the chorus and pretty pictures. This version here,” he tapped his chest, “is for outdoors. By the fire, when the lyre is asleep.”

Later, when the boys had left, the bard sat down beside him. Without his lyre. Without that half-pious face he made when he sang.

"I heard you corrected me," he said. Not an accusation, more of an observation.

Wigstan shrugged his good shoulder. "I'm not correcting you," he said. "I'm correcting what your songs do in their heads. There's a difference."

The bard sighed, running his hand through his beard. "You know why I sing it the way I do," he said. "They need brilliance. If I just throw them rotten bones and coughs, they'll get up and leave. Or they'll hang themselves. I know the feeling. I've been in halls where no one wanted to listen anymore because there was too much truth in the words."

“I’m not asking you to sing the hall clean,” Wigstan said. “I just don’t want you to make us into gods we never were. If you’re going to put me in your verses, at least leave a little dirt on my feet.”

The bard nodded slowly. "I can put the fear into the pauses," he said. "Between the words. Not directly, but... perceptible. For those who listen. They won't allow me more than that. If I completely dismantle their heroes, they'll throw me out with my own instrument."

"Do what you have to," Wigstan murmured. "I'm doing the same."

"What do you mean?"

“I tell my version,” said Wigstan. “Not to everyone. Only to those who fall silent when no one else is singing. If someone comes to me wanting not just glamour, but grit – then they’ll get it. Maybe that’s enough. Maybe not.”

The bard smiled crookedly. "Then we're not so different after all," he said. "You thrust your truth into faces ready for it. I thrust their dreams into melodies they can still bear. And somewhere in between, Beowulf stumbles around in memory, trying to figure out how much he can be pulled in all directions at once."

They took a drink together. Not to anyone, not to anything. Just to break the silence.

Over the next few evenings, Wigstan listened more closely. The bard kept his word, as best as anyone could. Among the heroic verses, less polished lines appeared. One verse about dirty furs, another about trembling hands before raising a sword. Small, inconspicuous moments where the songs stumbled briefly, allowing a hint of imperfection to slip through.

Most people ignored it. A few didn't. Wigstan saw it in their eyes. There was a boy who didn't laugh at the word "fear," but clamped his mouth shut. There was a woman who, when

describing the cave, tightened her hand around the jug, as if she knew exactly what such places smelled like.

"Those are the ones who are worth it," thought Wigstan. "Not the ones who shout during the chorus."

In the corner of the hall, someone had started sketching the new hill on a piece of wood. Children stood around it, pointing and asking when they could go.

“We’ll build him a place,” Wigstan heard someone say. “A proper one. With stones. Then we can sing to him, and maybe he’ll hear it after all.”

Wigstan looked up at the roof, as if he might find an answer somewhere between the beams.

"He can't hear anything anymore," he thought. "He's done his part. Now it's our turn. We, who endure his songs and yet don't forget our own."

Later, as the hall emptied and the bard wrapped his lyre in a cloth, Wigstan remained seated by the fire. Only Wulfgar was still there, half asleep, half awake, his head leaning against the post.

“Do you believe,” Wigstan asked into the darkness, “that there will ever be a version that is true?”

Wulfgar opened one eye and looked at him. "No," he said. "There will only be those who are closer or those who are farther away. Truth is not a stone you hold up. It is more like smoke. You can see it, you can smell it, you can get it in your lungs. But you cannot grasp it. And if too many people are standing around it, everyone sees something different."

"And us?"

“We’re the fools who still know where the smoke comes from,” said Wulfgar. “Until we forget it too. Or until we ourselves are on fire.”

Wigstan nodded. He thought of the hill, the ashes, the songs, the dust in his lungs.

Songs for someone who cannot hear them.

And for a country that prefers to sing rather than look into the shadows that remain when the heroes are gone.

The next morning would come. With less brilliance, more cold. With questions no verse could answer. With shadows that grew longer as the sun sank lower.

And then someone would ask: "Who goes first?"

Wigstan felt the cough lurking deep inside him, like a little dragon that no one had sung about.

The heroes had left. The shadows remained.

CHAPTER 34 – When the heroes leave and the shadows remain

Winter didn't arrive with a bang, but on silent feet, like a thief who already knows where the loose floorboards creak. First, there were the mornings when your breath hung in the air before the sun even noticed. Then the puddles that never quite thawed. Finally, the days when the wind whistled through every crack and you sat in the hall as if wrapped in a huge, badly mended coat.

The stories of Beowulf had spread like wildfire. You didn't need to look for them; they grew of their own accord in the dark corners. In every hut, in every yard, in every damned corner of the land, there was someone who said, "I was there," even if they hadn't been. They made the dragon bigger, the fire hotter, the heroic deeds more brilliant. It's amazing how much gold you can get from ashes if you open your mouth wide enough.

Wigstan noticed how the days slipped by while his cough persisted. Sometimes worse, sometimes better. Some mornings it felt as if stones had been placed in his chest. Others it was just a heavy shadow that appeared if he took the stairs too quickly. The herbs they gave him all tasted like some mixture of earth, mold, and false hope.

"You're still alive," the healer would say every time he reappeared in her corner, his hands cold, his gaze too attentive. "As long as you swear, your body will still cooperate."

He swore, therefore he lived. A simple equation, but better than nothing.

The council—this rabble of people too slow to run away—did what it could. They counted, divided, and argued. They sent men to the fields who weren't yet dead, but were close to it. They divided the last of the salt not by bloodline, but by the area burned. The old men in the back rows grumbled, whispering of "the old days," when all this was still called "order." The young men had no time for the old days; they were busy enough trying not to go to bed hungry.

The hill remained untouched. For the time being. It was like a bad tooth: everyone felt it, but no one wanted to get the pliers. Men who had drunk too much the night before would sometimes stand at the edge of the dragon's mound, staring into the upturned earth and telling themselves that there was a simple problem down there—one that could be solved with sacks and ropes. The next morning, they pretended to remember nothing.

Wulfgar was everywhere and nowhere. He helped with wood, he sat on the council, he stood by the door whenever some fool started throwing the crown around the room as if it were a stone that just needed to be picked up. He drank, but not like he used to. Back then, the mead had propelled him forward; now it sometimes only kept him from falling backward.

One evening, as the wind shook the hall outside and the air inside smelled of grease, smoke, and wet furs, Wigstan sat at the edge of the fire, gazing into the flames without truly seeing them. The bard was gone, had moved on to where new stories awaited him. All that remained of him were his songs in people's minds. They sang them now themselves, off-key, but loudly.

“You look like someone who was left over by mistake,” said Wulfgar, sinking down beside him. His burned arm had stiffened. The skin beneath it—what little remained—pulled in the cold like a poorly healed rope.

“I am,” Wigstan replied. “Most of the ones I knew are buried under something. Wood, stone, dragon.”

"Welcome to the club of shadows," Wulfgar murmured. "The heroes lie in the smoke, we sit in the remains."

Some song, once about Grendel but now more about mead than monsters, was being butchered in the hall. A few of the boys were bellowing the chorus as if they were forcing the beams to sing along.

"They're starting to interfere with you," Wulfgar said casually.

"What?"

“Into the songs,” he explained. “At first you were just ‘the boy who stood in the dragon.’ Now your name appears. Not always in the right place, but it does appear.”

Wigstan grimaced. "They could at least wait until I'm dead," he said. "Then I won't have to listen to this nonsense anymore."

“They’re not like that,” Wulfgar said. “If they have someone who’s still alive, they can observe him better while they rewrite his story.”

A woman came by and placed a pot next to the fire. It was a thin stew, mostly water, with a few pieces of something that, with a lot of imagination, could be considered meat. People came closer and held out bowls. Food was no longer a matter of taste, only of order.

Wigstan watched them. Men who had survived the dragon firestorm in the summer were now queuing for a handful of warm broth. Children who, in the days after the pyre, had clung fearfully to their mothers' arms, chased each other past the benches, sometimes even laughing when no one was looking.

"That's how quickly it happens," he thought. "The king is dust, the dragon is bone in the hill, and the children are playing tag in the hall again."

He coughed, briefly but deeply. The people near him barely flinched anymore. They had grown accustomed to the fact that the dragon cough now resided in one of them.

"Were you up there today?" Wulfgar asked.

"At the stake?"

“At the square,” Wulfgar corrected. “Where it was. They started hauling stones.”

Wigstan shook his head. "I was out in the fields," he murmured. "Where the soil no longer knows whether it wants to let anything grow. I don't have the strength for stones."

“They’re building him a mound,” said Wulfgar. “Not like the one over there above the dragon. Smaller. More humane. A heap with a few stones around it, a bit of ash in it, a few bones that no one knows for sure are really his. But they need somewhere to go when it all gets too much. Somewhere they can say, ‘Beowulf, you bastard, why did you leave us like this?’”

“He won’t answer anything,” Wigstan murmured.

“Of course not,” said Wulfgar. “But sometimes it’s enough to know where you can unleash your curses.”

Later that night, when most had retreated to their corners, the hall was slowly breathing less soundly, and only a few sparks were still dancing in the firehouse, Wigstan finally got up and went out.

The wind was biting, dry, with that crisp cold that makes all sounds sharper. He pulled his coat tighter around him and trudged up the slope, which he now knew like the back of his hand. The burnt spot from the pyre was no longer fresh, but it was still visible: a dark patch around which the ground was more bare than elsewhere.

Beside it, a little further on, they had begun to build the new mound. Not a huge burial mound, more like a piled-up ridge of stones and earth. Men had toiled all day, swearing and sweating. One had caught his foot, another had strained his back. The death of a king always meant work for those who had to keep breathing.

A few dark lumps lay beside the mound, carefully laid on a cloth. Ash residue, bone fragments, something that might once have been part of Beowulf. The healer had said, "Take only what you can carry, without inventing stories." This pile was what remained after the wind had taken its share.

Wigstan stopped at the edge. He didn't intend to go any closer. Even from here, the air still smelled of stale smoke.

"Well," he muttered into the darkness, "they're building your monument. Not bad for a man who maintained until the very end that he had miscalculated eternity."

The wind had no opinion on the matter. It simply whipped around his neck and made him shiver.

Wulfgar came up the slope a little later, panting and cursing. "Every time I have to come up here, I wonder why we always put our important places where you half die before you get to the top," he growled.

"So that people think twice before they run up there," Wigstan said.

“Most people don’t think at all,” Wulfgar replied. “They’re busy enough just trying to get their feet moving in the right direction.”

They stood side by side, looking at the half-finished hill.

"Do you know what that is?" Wulfgar asked after a while.

“A pile of stones?”

“A mirror,” said Wulfgar. “Look at it in ten years, and you’ll know how the country is doing. If it’s well-maintained, if there are fresh flowers, if the stones aren’t crumbling, then they still have enough power left for memory. If it’s overgrown, rotting, being used as a storage site, then you know: they’re done for. Then it’s just another stain in a land full of stains.”

"And what do you wish for?"

Wulfgar thought for a moment. "That they don't make him too saintly," he said. "I don't want every farmer to walk crookedly three times when he passes by here. But I also don't want them to forget him right away. Something in between. A place where you kick a stone, curse, and then realize: Ah yes, that old bastard."

Wigstan nodded. In his mind, he saw children clambering around on the hill while their parents stood below, trying to look dignified. He saw teenagers coming up on bad nights, mead bottles in hand, confiding things to the dead king that they couldn't say to living people. He saw old men trudging up here to make sure they hadn't misremembered the world.

Heroes depart. Shadows remain.

The shadows weren't just what the moon cast on the ground. They were what lingered in people's minds. A tone of voice. A curse. A particular laugh at the edge of a fire. A cough that echoed through the hall at night like a memory of fire.

"And you?" Wulfgar asked after a while. "What will you do when winter is over? When the fields see something other than scorched earth again?"

“Breathe,” said Wigstan. “If it works.”

"And what if it works out better?"

Wigstan considered this, rubbing his good hand across his face. "Then... perhaps... I'll wander through the courtyards," he said slowly. "To those who appear in the songs without ever having been asked. I'll tell them what I saw. Not as a bard. Just like that. In the evenings by the fire. If someone wants to know what the smoke really smelled like."

"You want to tell stories?" Wulfgar raised an eyebrow. "You'll make a half-bard."

“No,” said Wigstan. “The bards tell songs. I tell leftovers. The pieces that don’t fit anywhere.”

Wulfgar chuckled softly. "Then I'll be your first listener," he said. "Someone has to make sure you don't start lining your own pockets."

They stood there in silence for a while longer, until the wind finally convinced them that no thought was worth risking frostbite up here.

On their way back to the hall, their shadows glided diagonally across the ground, stretched by the moon. Two figures continued walking, while above them a country struggled to adapt to new rules where "hero" was no longer an official profession, but a poor excuse for past mistakes.

Inside, the songs would continue to be sung. Outside, the ground would continue to freeze and thaw. Eventually, the hill would be finished. Eventually, someone would lose heart and go into the dragon's cave after all. Eventually, Wigstan would stop coughing—for good reasons or bad.

But at that moment, they were simply two men walking down the slope with cold hands, broken arms, and too many images in their heads.

The heroes were gone. The shadows carried on.

Winter dragged on like a bad mood that no one could shake. It didn't come in waves, more like a constant background noise: cold, hunger, short days, long nights. You didn't get used to it, you just stopped being surprised by it.

Wigstan coughed his way through the weeks. Sometimes more, sometimes less. There were days when he thought the thing with the dragon in his lungs had calmed down, as if the beast inside had filled its stomach and fallen asleep. And then came one night when he lay awake, coughing thick, dark stuff into a cloth and thinking: "Maybe it's just turned over."

The healer remained unmoved. "Your body is still trying to get rid of the smoke," she said. "Sometimes it gets some out. Sometimes it doesn't. As long as you get more out than you take in, you're alive."

"You have a shitty way of selling hope," he muttered.

“I’m not selling anything,” she retorted. “I’m just counting. Breaths in, breaths out. As long as that’s not completely out of balance, complain to the wrong office.”

The council persevered. That was the key word: persevere. No one seriously thought about making the world a better place. They only wanted to prevent it from falling apart even further than it already was. The farmer with the shovel-like hands sometimes came into the hall, bringing figures that sounded more like confessions: "So much grain, so much cattle, so many fields, pretending there's still something left to be had." The merchant juggled inventory lists, looking as if he were secretly calculating how many of them the winter would consume.

Snow lay over the hill. First a thin layer, later thicker. The pyre stain was still visible beneath it – darker, harder. The new Beowulf hill also got its share. Children slid down its side in the sun, even though their mothers shouted for respect. Respect was a thin garment when your boots were soaked through.

On one of those days when the sun barely managed to peek over the edge of the sky and then immediately grew tired again, Wigstan sat in the yard mending a sign. The movement wasn't good for his shoulder, but he had to do something, otherwise not only the boards would rot, but his head would too.

"You're doing it wrong," said a voice above him.

He looked up. A girl stood there, maybe ten years old, with braids that looked as if they had already seen three fights. In her hand she held a stick, which was quite obviously a "weapon" because of the way she was holding it.

"Oh yeah?" asked Wigstan. "What do you know about shields?"

“My father always said you shouldn’t patch places where there are already too many cracks,” she said. “At some point you have to let go and do something new. Otherwise it will break apart at the first blow.”

“Your father is right,” Wigstan murmured. “And where is your father?”

“In the hill,” she said, without pathos. “Not the one with the dragon. The other one. Where they put the normal ones.”

"Then we know he knows something about breaking," said Wigstan, putting the shield aside.

She sat down next to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "You're the one with the dragon cough," she said.

"Nice that I now have a title too," he grumbled. "It's not enough that they put me in songs."

"Do you sing them?" she asked curiously.

"If I'm drunk enough, maybe," he said. "But I can't get the rhymes off my tongue without them sticking in my throat like bones."

“Mom says the songs are half-lies,” she said. “But she likes them anyway. She says they help her not to remember everything exactly as it was.”

Wigstan looked at her. There it was again: children saying sentences that would take others three winters and two wars to say.

“Mom is right,” he said. “Half-lies are easier to digest. Whole truths are hard to stomach.”

"And you?" asked the girl. "What do you want? Lies or truths?"

He laughed, a short, rough laugh. "It depends on how much mead is left in the jug," he said. "And how cold it is outside. On really bad days, I don't want to hear anything at all. On other days, it's enough for me if someone says, 'That's roughly how it was.'"

She nodded gravely and stood up again. "I'm going to the hill," she said. "Mom says I should tell him what winter is like. So he knows what he's missing."

"Which one?" Wigstan asked. "Dragon Hill or the other one?"

“The one with the king,” she said. “The dragon was just an animal. Kings get stories.”

She ran off, almost tripping in the snow, then caught herself. Wigstan watched her and thought: "There goes one who will later know more than half the bards."

Later, in the hall, the trader brought bad news, packaged in neat sentences: "The supplies will be sufficient if no one gets sick, no one steals, and winter ends early."

"So they are not enough," Wulfgar translated.

“One can hope,” the priest replied half-heartedly.

"Hope doesn't fill stomachs," muttered the farmer.

Wigstan listened as they juggled. Flour, barrels, guilt. The mood shifted when one of the older men began to talk about the hill. About the gold. About the "king's inheritance." Again that word: inheritance. As if something lying beneath a dead dragon were a gift and not rotten fruit.

“We had said…” began the priest.

“We said ‘temporary’,” the old man interrupted. “Temporary is over when the children start looking thinner than the dogs. Beowulf wouldn’t have wanted his treasure rotting in the mountain while people were dying here.”

Wulfgar raised his eyebrows. "Another one who thinks he knows what Beowulf would have wanted," he said. "He's barely cold, and every idiot uses his name like a set of keys."

"And what do you suggest?" the old man snapped at him. "Should we sit here and watch the weakest perish, just so some hill can have some peace and quiet?"

The words hit home. That was the problem: they weren't wrong. They were just dangerous.

Wigstan felt the space around him shrink. The word "hill" was like a spark in dry straw. It wouldn't take much more to set everything ablaze again.

“We’re not getting anything,” said Wulfgar. “Not now. Not like this. Not while anyone here can still think who isn’t on the verge of starvation.”

"And when then?" asked the old man. "When half of us are dead? When the spring seed lies in nothingness? When..."

Wigstan stood up. His cough protested, his head was throbbing, but he stood.

“I was in the hill,” he said, and the sentence cut through the voices. “I was in the belly, in the gold, in the fire. And I tell you: anyone who thinks there’s a solution down there has less sense than a drunken pig.”

"You were there when the dragon was still alive," the old man retorted. "Now he's dead."

“The dragon is dead,” said Wigstan. “But what made him great did not die with him. It resides within you. In the look I see right now when you say ‘gold.’ You will revive him. Without scales, without wings. As strife, as envy, as greed.”

A murmur went through the hall. Someone laughed, uncertainly. Someone else cursed.

"And what do you suggest?" asked the merchant. "That we humble ourselves to death?"

Wigstan breathed heavily. “I suggest,” he said, “that we try everything else first. Every field that still breathes. Every hunt that doesn’t just wipe out the last remaining animals. Every

damned possibility that doesn’t involve crawling into a mountain that has already swallowed more lives than you can count.”

"And if that's not enough?" the old man pressed.

“Then we’ll go back up,” said Wigstan. “And stand where we can see the hill. And then you decide whether you’d rather drown in gold or fight in the dirt. But you’ll do it with clear heads. Not now. Not drunk on the word ‘treasure’.”

The priest looked at him with an expression somewhere between approval and concern. Wulfgar looked at him as if to say, "Well roared, but the cattle in the room are not asleep yet."

The discussion dragged on for a while. Wigstan hadn't achieved a victory, more of a reprieve. A few days, maybe weeks, in which the hill back there could continue to steam without people slashing its belly open.

Later, when the hall had calmed down again, Wulfgar sat down next to him.

"You know," he said, "that you've just made sure they'll hate you when the winter gets too harsh."

“Let them,” said Wigstan. “As long as they don’t love me for sending them to the hill.”

"That's the point," Wulfgar murmured. "You get heroes for a moment. Shadows for the rest. To some, you'll be the one who denied them the treasure. To others, the one who saved them from the next fire. And you can't control any of it."

"I stabbed the dragon in the flesh," Wigstan said wearily. "Now my knife is stuck in their heads. Great."

Winter continued its course. A few died. Not many. More than one would have liked, but fewer than the worst doomsayers had predicted. Children fell ill and recovered; some stayed away. Old people fell asleep, some with a curse, some with a sigh.

The night on the hill became a silent ritual. People went there, alone, in pairs. Some brought a piece of bread, others only words. Sometimes a figure sat up there in the dark, and you didn't know if it was talking to the dead king or simply listening to the wind.

Wigstan didn't go there often. But when he did, he stood at the edge and said nothing. He knew there was nothing he could tell the dust that it didn't already know.

Heroes are passing away, he thought. And what remains is not the statues, not the hills, not the songs. It is the people standing in the draft when the smoke dissipates. Those who continue coughing when no one is clapping anymore.

One morning, when the air already smelled of melting snow and somewhere in the forest the first bird started practicing its silly song too early, Wigstan stood in the yard. He took a deep breath. It hurt. But it was still good.

Wulfgar stepped beside him, his eyes narrowed, his burned arm pressed to his chest as always. "Do you smell that?" he asked.

"What?"

“What comes after that,” Wulfgar said. “New dirt. New problems. New songs.”

“New shadows,” Wigstan added.

"They'll come along for free," Wulfgar said.

They stood silently for a while, breathing in the cold air that met dragon remains somewhere deep inside. And yet, beneath all the coughing and scars, there was something that—if handled with great care—might have been called hope. A hope not made of gold, but of the stubborn will to keep going.

The heroes had gone. The shadows had taken their place. And yet, a faint scent of the future hung over everything, one that couldn't quite be wiped away.

It was one of those days when the light couldn't decide whether to stay or disappear again. Gray hung over everything, no real sky, no real fog, just that tired in-between. In some places the snow had melted away, in others it had turned into dirty piles containing ash, straw, and dirt.

Wigstan stood at the edge of the hall and watched as the world began to like color again. Not much yet, just a few stubborn green shoots pushing through the hard ground. Evidence that the Earth hadn't yet decided to give up completely.

The people had become calmer, but not peaceful. Peace is a luxury only those with enough to eat and no debts on their minds can afford. Down here, there was more of a weary industriousness. They talked less about the dragon and more about which field needed tending first, which fence needed replacing, which roof would leak next.

The council only met when absolutely necessary. No one wanted to sit at the same table every other evening rehashing the same lines. They had realized that you couldn't feed a country with endless words. Words were like mead: nice, but your stomach keeps rumbling if there's nothing substantial to follow.

Wigstan wasn't an official member of the council. At least, it wasn't written down anywhere. But they looked to him for advice on anything that smelled of smoke. This was his new field: anything to do with the memory of the hill, the dragon, the king. Not because he wanted to be. Because no one else had been close enough to have a say.

That day a messenger arrived from a village far enough away to pretend it had its own problems. A wiry fellow with a face that looked more like wind than blankets. He brought a poorly tied bag containing meager gifts—dried fish, a few rough cloths—and a message.

“They want to hear,” he said, after being allowed into the hall with much suspicion. “About what happened here. About the dragon. About the king. About the boy.” He pointed at Wigstan without realizing it.

"They have their own bards," grumbled Wulfgar. "Let them come up with something. That's what they do best."

"They want to hear what it was really like," the messenger insisted. "The songs are already there. But the old folks say that if you only eat songs, you'll become stupid. They want someone to come who has smelled the smoke."

“Then they should dig up the pyre,” someone from the back table chimed in. A few laughed, but not wholeheartedly.

The priest looked at Wigstan. Not urgently, not pleadingly. More like the way you look at someone who happens to have the key that nobody else wanted.

"You don't have to," Wulfgar said quietly. "No one can force you to go through the villages and read your scars to them."

Wigstan looked at his hands. They were rough, cracked, with those fine, dark lines from tools, cold, and too many nights by the fire. Not at all regal. Not at all heroic.

“If I don’t go,” he said slowly, “others will come. And tell them how the dragon flew in the air and Beowulf put out fires with the flick of his finger. Then, in a few years, children will be sitting in some barn, looking at the hill and thinking they could be just like him if they only shouted loud enough.”

"Perhaps that's inevitable," Wulfgar said.

“Maybe,” said Wigstan. “But I was standing in the gut. I have the right to at least throw another version at them. Whether they pick it up is up to them.”

The messenger scrutinized him as if trying to discern the dragon within. All he saw was a man who hadn't slept enough and was carrying too much weight in his chest.

“How far is it?” Wigstan asked.

"Three days," said the messenger. "If you don't walk slowly."

Wulfgar exhaled contemptuously. "Three days for other people's desires," he said. "They can consider themselves lucky if your lungs can hold out."

The healer intervened. "Lungs or not," she said. "Movement is good. If he stays here, he'll just rot in his own cough."

"Nice," Wigstan murmured. "So I'll either die of the cold outside or of standing still inside. Thanks for the wide selection."

In the end, it was the same as always: He didn't pack much because he didn't have much. A coat that had seen better winters. A knife that was more of a tool than a weapon. A cup, out of sheer habit. A small bundle of herbs that the healer pressed into his hand with a look that said, "Don't gulp it all down at once."

Wulfgar led him a short distance out of the village. Not far, just to the point where the path forked – right to the fields, left to the wide stretches where no one walked regularly anymore. They stopped, as if both were afraid that one more step would make everything more final.

"If they start worshipping you," said Wulfgar, "hit them over the head."

"With what?" Wigstan asked. "With my cough?"

“In your words,” replied Wulfgar. “Tell them how bad you smelled when you came out of the cave. That will help.”

Wigstan nodded. "And you? Are you staying here and playing the old dog in the doorway?"

"Someone needs to make sure they don't sneak into the hill while you're out," Wulfgar muttered. "I'll bark if necessary."

They stood facing each other. No hug, no elaborate farewell rituals. Men like her didn't need that. Or couldn't handle it.

"If you fall over on the way," said Wulfgar, "at least try to do it somewhere where someone will find you. Not in some cursed ditch."

“I’m trying my best,” said Wigstan. “Promise me one thing: if they start talking about crowns again, throw ashes in their faces.”

Wulfgar grinned crookedly. "With pleasure."

Wigstan set off. Not a great stride, not a proud march. Just one foot in front of the other. The path stretched on, first muddy, then frozen, then soft again. The wind was a constant companion, sometimes at his back, sometimes in his face.

He coughed a lot during the first few kilometers. The cold brought water to his eyes, and his lungs complained. Eventually, the cough lessened. Not because it disappeared – rather because his body realized it needed to conserve its energy.

He slept poorly at night, on hard floors, under meager roofs, sometimes under no roof at all. The stars were cold and indifferent. Sometimes he thought that somewhere in all this emptiness there really was a hall where gods sat and watched his toil. Most of the time he thought that he was simply a man trudging through a land that would more or less forget him as soon as he stopped.

In the village the messenger had meant, the air was no different than at home: smoke, animals, people, fear. They didn't receive him like a king, more like a living rumor. Children stared, women whispered, men pretended to be too busy to stare.

That evening they sat him by their fire. Not as big as the one in Heorot, but big enough to bring faces out of the darkness. One of them took out a lyre, looked at him, and put it away again.

“We… wanted to hear,” said a middle-aged man whose hands looked as if they’d never had a day off. “Not the songs, those have arrived. Yours.”

Wigstan looked into the fire. The flames were the same as in any hall: hungry, restless, familiar.

He told the story. Not everything. Not in the order a bard would have. No rising drama, no artful repetitions. Just images, tossed about like logs. The cave. The stench. The feeling of a rock seeming to breathe. Beowulf, old, angry, and weary. The dragon, more disease than beast. His own cough, which never went away.

He saw their faces change. Some grimaced, as if the words didn't suit them. Others listened as if they had been waiting for years for this tone: one that didn't pretend heroes were made of some other stuff.

No one clapped when he finished. No cheers, no calls for "More." Just a slow, heavy exhalation, as if everyone in the room had simultaneously let their shoulders slump.

An old man, his eyes already half-deep in mist, nodded at him. "That's one way to tell a story," he said. "Not pretty. But it doesn't slip out so easily."

Wigstan stayed two nights. He slept in a corner room with thin walls and a loose roof. He coughed, talked, and listened to what people told him about their loved ones—sons who had fallen, men who had run away, women who had buried more than they knew the names of their children.

Then he moved on. The next village was different, but not really. Different faces, same questions. "How was it? Did he really...? Were you scared? Did it hurt a lot?"

He noticed that he wasn't telling the same story every time. Sometimes he emphasized the smoke, sometimes the gold, sometimes the sound a person makes when they realize they're dying. Not because he wanted to lie. Because the truth was too vast to be delivered in a single package.

After a few weeks, his path became a pattern. Village, fire, questions, images, coughing, sleep. Everywhere he felt the dragon's shadow loom over the land, the name Beowulf creeping through the walls, the songs already taking root. His words weren't an antidote, more like minor disturbances. Cracks in the varnish.

Sometimes he wondered if it was all worthwhile. Whether his version changed anything, or if it was just an extra burden he was carrying around until his legs gave out.

One evening, in a village on the edge of a forest, he was stopped by a boy who had previously only stared at him from a distance.

"I wanted to go into the hill," whispered the boy, as if making a confession. "When I first heard about the gold. I thought I'd grow up, be strong, run in there, grab a handful, and then I'd be somebody. Now... now I don't even know if I want to climb up there anymore."

“Good,” said Wigstan. “At least one of us has won something.”

"What?"

“You saw the dragon before it saw you,” said Wigstan. “That’s more than most of us can say.”

When he eventually headed back towards Heorot, the land was different and yet the same. The snow was gone, the ground muddy, the air smelled of damp earth and new grass. Water stood in the ditches, and birds sat in the trees, singing far too optimistically.

He was still coughing. Sometimes less, sometimes more. The healer would say: "You're alive."

He stopped on the last hill before the hall came into view. Heorot lay there like an old animal that had decided to hold on for a few more years. The dragon's mound beyond was dark, overgrown in places, still open in others. Beowulf's mound already bore its first traces: trampled grass, a few simple stones, a wooden post with a roughly carved mark.

Wulfgar was waiting down by the path. Of course. A dog knows the times when people return who have temporarily strayed from the pack.

"Well?" he called out before Wigstan had reached the bottom. "Did they give you mead or just questions?"

“Both,” said Wigstan. “Sometimes in the same bowl.”

Wulfgar scrutinized him. "You look worse than when you left," he observed.

“Then the exterior view matches the interior,” Wigstan replied.

They walked side by side, back towards the hall. Above them, a few crows cawed as if they had the last word.

The country had new scars, new stories, new children fighting in the shadow of old names.

The heroes had gone. The shadows moved on. And somewhere, between songs and dust, between coughs and meager laughter, a handful of people tried not to forget that the truth rarely shines – but sometimes, precisely for that reason, it is the only thing that remains when the smoke has cleared.

imprint

This book was written under the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND) License.

This license allows others to use and share the book for free, as long as they credit the author and the source of the book and do not use it for commercial purposes.

Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail:admin@perplex.click

Homepage:https://www.perplex.click

Year of publication: 2025