

HALLGRIM RAGNARSON

Viking saga



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Chapter 1 - Mead at Dawn

The morning smelled of cold fish, guilty conscience, and the sweat of men who think they're gods as long as their cups are full. I woke up because someone was snoring in my ear. It was the coast. The whole damn coast. The sea was coughing up foam, the seagulls were screeching like grumpy mothers-in-law, and my head was pounding like Thor had clogged it with the handle of Mjolnir and forgotten to pull it out.

"Get up, Hallgrim," my stomach said. "Or die with dignity in the straw." I chose something in between: I rolled out of the straw, stepped on something the gods certainly hadn't blessed, and bumped my forehead against the bench I must have hugged yesterday. The bench smelled of mead, of salt, of someone's fear. My tongue was a piece of leather, my eyes grains of sand with little knives.

Outside, the harbor spewed fog. Our village—a crust of wood, smoke, and insults—clung to the bay like a scab grown too proud. The houses hung like shoulders that had to bear too much too soon, and the longhouse grinned crookedly: my kingdom, my grave, my joke.

I sucked in air. It tasted of seaweed and promised trouble.

"Captain!" someone shouted. "You owe me your teeth!" That was Bjorni, our blacksmith. He grinned toothlessly and blamed me. To be honest, I had lost his teeth yesterday by giving him the wrong stool to sit on—the one with only three legs. Bjorni fell and hit the table with his mouth. The table stayed, but Bjorni didn't. "Put new ones in there, made of iron," I said. "Then at least you'll bite through the helmsmen when they start whining again."

He showed me a hammer. "I can make you a crown of nails, Hallgrim." "Only if it shines. I want to impress the seagulls."

The seagulls circled over the jetty as if they expected us to kill someone at any moment and set their breakfast table. I mentally gave them a morsel: the Jarl, who was coming today to demand something I didn't have—money, mead, respect. He usually takes whatever flees the fastest. So, respect.

I shuffled to the "Schiefer Nordwind" pub. The door was jammed like an old back; I kicked it open anyway, because doors have to learn what people learn: If I want something, then I want it.

Inside, it was night, and the night reeked of cheap decisions. Torfi "Two-Sip" was asleep under the table, which meant he was only on sip one. Ulf Ashbeard sat by the fire, stirring a pan of fish remains so black that even the darkness was respectful. At the bar, Svala counted coins as if they were naughty children—tapping each one with her finger, as if she had to ask, "And who adopted you?"

"You look like a storm that died in a bucket," said Svala without looking up. "Says the woman who takes money from men who love their coins because they have no one else." She grinned. Svala always grinned when you hit her, but never when you missed. "Do you need mead?" "I need answers." "Mead, then."

I rapped on the counter, and the counter rapped back, having been unstable for weeks. "Where's Barrel Seven?" She raised an eyebrow. "Gone." "Gone as in: empty? Or gone as in: runs away because it has legs?" "Gone as in: pawned." I blinked. That hurt. "Who?" "You," she said. "Yesterday. You wanted to double your luck at the dice." "Did it work?" "Yes," she said. "You ended up with twice as little as you had before."

I leaned my head against the post. The post felt like the truth: hard, cold, immovable, and completely uninterested. "Who did I pawn it to?" "The merchant from the north. Big, dirty, smells of old blubber. Calls himself Finnbogi, but I bet his real name is Elend."

Ulf scratched his beard, sending ash trickling down. "The one with the cross-eyed dog?" "The dog isn't cross-eyed," said Svala. "He's just checking both exits."

I sighed. My throat was scratchy. "The Jarl wants his tribute today." Svala pushed a cup toward me. "Then you should give him something he's not expecting." "Like what?" "Politeness." I laughed. It sounded like someone throwing stones into a well. "I'd rather bring him Finnbogi." "The Jarl doesn't collect merchants," she said. "He collects reasons to hate you."

Torfi woke up because his head rolled against the edge of the table. "Is it evening already?" "It's too late for you and too early for God," I said. "Which God?" "The one who listens." "Then it's not one of ours," Torfi muttered, tipping the jug and finding nothing. He looked disappointedly into the hole, which was emptier than his future life.

I stepped into the courtyard. Fog trailed threads. A black feather was stuck to the door lintel: a raven, clean, shining. Not from around here. I plucked it out. It was cold. "Odin sent you a postcard," said Irdís from behind me, who had crept up on me with the fog like a thought you don't want. "If he wants something, let him say it," I said. "He said," she said. "You only hear when you scream." "I always hear," I said. "I just like to ignore."

She smiled thinly. "Then ignore this: The wind will shift tomorrow, the water will become intrusive, and the Jarl will be angry today. In that order." "The Jarl always gets angry," I said. "It's his hobby. Some collect coins, he collects grudges. You don't have to take it seriously." "Yes, you do," she said. "Men like him are bread knives: blunt, but they'll cut you every time you're inattentive."

I pocketed the feather. Lucky charm or evidence, we'll see. Bjorni, the blacksmith, stumbled out of the alley, followed by a boy with a wheelbarrow full of horseshoes. "Hallgrim!" Bjorni shouted. "I've got a ram ready for your boat!" "We don't ram monasteries anymore," I said. "There are hardly any left who don't know me." "You can ram them into barges, too," said Bjorni, proud as a rooster. "Or into the Jarl. When he's lying in the water." "I don't want wars, Bjorni," I said. "I want mead and peace." "One thing leads to another," he grunted. "First mead, then war, then peace."

Wood creaked on the dock. Our "Slanted Luck" steamed with sleep from its joints. I stroked the railing; it had more nicks than an old soul. Each nick a mistake, a story, a laugh that had hurt. I smelled pitch and salt, old blood that no one could completely scrub away.

"Captain!" Ulf called from the tavern. "Half the village pack wants to talk to you!" "The other half is scared," said Svala, stepping next to me. "Those with small hearts and big mouths are at the front."

They came: fishermen, traders, the widow who sells everyone their conscience, but never their merchandise; a few boys with too much courage and too little beard; two old women with knives in their eyes. And the Jarl. The Jarl, of course. He waddled like a wounded swan, but his gaze cut like ice. Behind him were two men who looked like doors that had learned to walk.

"Hallgrim Ragnarson," said the Jarl, as if he were rolling dice and only rolling ones. "Which one would you have liked?" I asked. "We have mead, fish, stories, insults. The latter is fresh." His cheeks flushed, and not from running. "I'm not here for jokes." "Me neither," I said. "Jokes just happen when you talk to me."

A wave splashed against the jetty as if the sea were applauding. The Jarl took a breath. "The Norwegians want their load next week. I'll take yours today. Barrel Seven, like every spring. Where is it?" "On the move," I said. "You pawned it," said Svala, kind as a sword. "Yesterday. To Finnbogi." The Jarl blinked slowly, like a cat before the pounce. "Then get it back." "He's already moved on," I said. "Even better," said the Jarl. "Then it'll be a walk in the park."

People laughed. Not because it was funny, but because they wanted to know if I was bleeding. I smiled at the crowd. Some stepped back, as if they'd just realized I was me again today.

"You have three days," said the Jarl. "Or I'll take what I can get." "Three days is a generous gift," I said. "Like the cough of an old horse." He nodded as if he'd won and turned away. He didn't push aside the doors behind him; he expected them to give way on their own. And they did. Doors are cowards.

The crowd dispersed. Only Svala remained, along with Irdís, and Ulf, who was trying to nail a loaf of bread into the pan because he thought it was fish. "Three days," said Svala. "We've got half the bread." "We've got what we always have," I said. "A boat, a few idiots, a problem." "And you've got raven feathers in your pocket," Irdís remarked. "I'd ask the oracle." "I'd rather ask Finnbogi," I said. "He answers in syllables you can count."

I stepped onto the quayside. The fog lifted. In the distance, across the bay, a dark patch danced along the line where water and sky kiss, pretending they don't know each other. A sail? Or just a wish?

"Crew together," I yelled. "We have a barrel to chase and a merchant to shame. And if we drown in the process, at least we'll drown completely." Ulf raised his head. "Sounds like a plan you should make sober." "I'm sober," I lied. "That's why I'm talking so sensibly."

We met at the boat. The Crooked Luck lay in the water like an old cat—tired, but ready to claw at anything if you looked at it the wrong way. Torfi carried a bundle of ropes as if they were crying babies; Svala had the cash bag on her belt, and I knew she'd be more likely to entrust it to a shark than to one of us in an emergency. Irdís arrived with a small bag of herbs that smelled like the forest was seeking revenge.

"Where did Finnbogi go?" asked Ulf. "Said something about the north, then up the river," said Svala. "Wanted fur, salt, rumors." "Rumors come free," said

Torfi. "Not for traders," she said. "They pay with their ears and collect with their tongues."

I stepped aboard, my hand over the carving on the bow—a dragon's head that saw more than it cared to admit. "Old friend," I whispered to the ship, "give me a tailwind today and the patience not to kill anyone before it's worth it."

A raven perched on the post by the jetty. It looked at me the way only animals and gods look at you: as if your skull were made of glass. I lifted the feather I had pocketed and twirled it in the air. The raven tilted its head. Then it pecked once at the wood and flew away, north. Irdís snorted. "There. Even the bird thinks you're trainable." "Or it thinks I'm its pet," I said. "And leads me to its food bowl."

We pushed off. The water took us, rumbling beneath the keel, slapping against the side like a naughty audience. I breathed deeper; on the water, even my head feels more right. The bay opened its mouth, and we sailed into teeth called waves. The wind crept down our necks; it smelled of wood that wants to travel.

Svala stood next to me at the wheel. "If we find Finnbogi, how will you convince him?" "With poetry and diplomacy," I said. "So with threats and lies." "I deliberately said the word diplomacy in such a way that it hurts."

On the shore, the houses backed away; children waved, some with both hands, others with small, invisible daggers for the future. Bjorni raised the hammer; he would raise it if I returned, and he would raise it if I didn't. Blacksmiths are reliable because metal demands it.

We passed the rock where the ancients say the first men commanded the sea to be still – and the sea laughed. I laughed along. The sea always laughs last; it is patient and great and has no ears for pleas.

"Hallgrim," said Torfi. "What if Finnbogi has already emptied the barrel?" "Then we'll take his next one," I said. "And his next one. And one from him personally, which he can't refill so quickly." "His blood?" asked Torfi, curious as a child at a precipice. "His pride," I said. "Blood is overrated. Pride screams longer."

The river branch Svala was referring to was a strip of dark water amidst the greenery, framed by alder trees that looked as if they were praying, but only for rain. The sail sagged; we grabbed the oars. We rowed like men rowing,

either aiming for their destination or for the edge of their temper—and sometimes it's the same thing.

"Do you hear that?" asked Irdís. "What?" Ulf panted. "Voices." We stopped. There was laughter, somewhere ahead, dirty laughter that sounded like coins changing hands. And the smell: blubber, salt, old fur. Finnbogi. Or someone who made equally bad decisions.

We landed, barely visible under a willow bush. I took my knife. It wasn't big, but it knew when to use it. "No one does heroic deeds," I whispered. "Heroic deeds are for men who want to die because they think someone will remember their name. We do dirty deeds. Someone will remember them, too."

We crept along the shore, our shoes wet and silent, our eyes sharp. A small clearing: a boat smaller than ours, two barrels on board, one with a notch I'd cut myself weeks ago. Barrel Seven. My bad mood guarantee.

Finnbogi sat by the fire, as wide as a cupboard, blowing into a conch shell as if he wanted to kiss it. Beside him was his dog—or his doorman. The animal was cross-eyed. Svala was right: he was checking both exits. Three men were sprawled around like stakes, one half-awake, two half-moving.

"Plan?" hissed Ulf. "Plan," I said. "No deaths, just lessons. We cut his rope, swap his barrel, and when he screams, we put something in his boat that screams louder." "What screams louder than a man losing his prey?" asked Torfi. "A truth," I said. "Or a secret."

Irdís nodded at me and pulled something from her pouch that looked like moss that had seen too much. "Smoke herb. Two breaths, and Finnbogi thinks his dog is reciting poetry." "Is he reciting good ones?" Ulf asked. "Better ones than you."

I crawled forward. The grass cut my hands, dirt crept into my nails. I smelled the fire, the oil, the dog—and something else. Metal. Coins. Greed was present, naked and proud. I saw the rope holding Barrel Seven to the boat. I saw Finnbogi's knife on his belt. I saw his dog test the air and... look past me. Thank God for squints.

A gust of wind, and the smoke from Irdís's herb wafted toward the fireplace. Finnbogi blinked. "Do you hear that?" he murmured. His dog squinted at him reproachfully. "You're a poet, Mundi," Finnbogi said to the dog. "So many rhymes in your drool."

I grinned into the earth. Svala pushed herself toward the boat, so lightly, as if she'd never learned to weigh herself. She untied the knot, swapped the barrel—his new one was empty, our old one was ready—and I was suddenly glad she was carrying the till, not me. She could do things with her fingers for which the gods must have invented poetry.

It worked, until it didn't. Torfi stepped on a branch. The branch cracked. It wasn't a loud noise, but in moments like this, even the stars are curious. Finnbogi raised his head. "Forest?" he asked. "Poem," said his dog, probably in his head. He stood up anyway.

I jumped. Not because I like heroics, but because this is the kind of mess you can't delegate. I was on him before he had half his knife. We rolled through ash, light, curses. He stank of old oil. I smelled of trouble.

"Hallgrim," he gasped. "You owe me a song." "I'll pay with a slap," I said, and gave him two so the economy wouldn't suffer.

His men murmured and stood still, but Irdís was there, her hand over their faces, smoke and whispered words. Two slumped, one laughed as if someone had told him a very old joke. Ulf kicked the dog with exactly the kindness one owes a bouncer: enough to postpone the conversation, not enough to make him lose the desire for revenge.

"My barrel," I gasped. "Our game," Finnbogi gasped. "The game is swapping barrels," I said. "The rules are written on the back of your forehead, which you rarely use."

"You rolled the dice yesterday," he reminded me. "I roll the dice every day," I said. "Today I won." "With what?" "With the fact that I said so."

We paused, both of us panting, my hand on the handle, his hand on his belt. A raven cawed in the tree. I swore the damned thing said, "Go on." So I did. "Three days," I said. "The Jarl wants Barrel Seven. Give it to me, and I'll give you something you don't have." "What then?" he asked. "A story in which you're not the fool." He thought for a moment. This was his weakest talent. "I want coins." "I want peace." "No one gets what they want," he said, almost philosophically. "Give me fifty, take your barrel." "I'll give you five," I said. "And a warning." "What one?" "If you set the Jarl on me, your dog will learn to live with only one outcome."

He blinked. "He likes exits." "We all like something," I said. "I like my barrel."

Svala cleared her throat and—as if by chance—held the till bag over the flames. "The air is dry," she said, innocent as a storm. "Bags are so fragile." Finnbogi watched. Greed is like a child: easily distracted. "Thirty," he said. "Ten," I said. "Twenty-five." "Seven. And next time I'll bring you a message you can sell." "From whom?" I raised the raven feather. "From the one who's been stalking you with a bird for days." His gaze lost some of its breadth. Faith sneaks through narrow doors. "You negotiate with strange partners, Hallgrim." "Better than stupid ones."

He laughed hoarsely. "Ten. Take it or I'll screw my poet." He nodded at the dog. "Ten," I said. "And we'll call it a deal." We shook each other as if testing each other to see if we were still in the right place. I paid reluctantly; Svala counted as if she was about to take the money back—maybe she was.

We pulled the barrel to the shore, exchanged glances, traded mistakes for opportunities. Finnbogi sat back down by the fire, his dog recited invisibly, and I felt the pen in my pocket grow heavier.

Back on the boat, the wind was different. It felt as if a hand had been placed on my back—large, rough, friendly, like a touchstone. "Was that just...?" Torfi began. "A fair trade?" Svala asked. "A miracle?" Ulf suggested. "A Tuesday," I said. "You get used to Tuesdays."

We loaded Barrel Seven. The sound as it slid into the boat bay was music. Bad music, yes. Folk music. But music. I tapped it. "Soon, beautiful. First the Jarl, then us." "You'll give the Jarl the barrel?" asked Svala. "I'll give him his dues. This barrel just happens to be identical." "And if he tastes curses?" "Curses are the only ingredient everyone likes."

We pushed off. The river exhaled, the bay took us back, the sea blinked. Clouds lay on the horizon like accusations. "Hallgrim," Irdís said quietly. "You know this doesn't go unaccounted for." "It never goes unaccounted for," I said. "The gods like accounting." "The gods like stories," she countered. "Accounting is what people make of it when they get guilty." "I don't have any," I said. "I'm thirsty."

When the village came back into view, the Jarl stood like a wart on the pier. He held his hands behind his back so no one could see how they itched. His men stood there like deliberate mistakes. "You're fast," he said as we docked. "I'm motivated," I said. "This is like fast, but with sense." We rolled Barrel Seven onto the jetty. It gurgled as if it had humor. The Jarl nodded as if he had accounts in his head. "Good," he said. "That saves me time." "And you know how much I save yours," I said.

He had the barrel opened, smelled, tasted. His face remained as it was: a place where feelings go to be shot. "All right," he said. I exhaled. Not because I was afraid. I exhaled because air has to go when it gets old.

"We're even, Hallgrim," he said. "Today." "That's all I want," I said. "Tomorrow is rude enough to invite yourself."

He turned and marched off. His men followed, leaving behind a smell of leather and boredom. The villagers did what they do best: watch. Some nodded at me, others spat in thought. Svala stepped to my side. "You were clever today." "Don't say it so openly," I begged. "The gods listen and then want proof."

A shadow glided over us. I looked up. A raven, large and silent, curved as if writing a word in the fog. I couldn't read it. I didn't want to read it.

"Come," I said. "Let's drink to the deal." "To the bill," said Irdís. "To the one we don't pay," said Svala.

We went to the dive bar. The door was stuck again. This time I let it open. You don't have to win every battle when you know where the war is.

In "The Crooked North Wind," the smoke was friendly and the light indecisive. Ulf added wood; the flames grinned. Torfi held a jug in his hand as if he were a found child. Bjorni came in later, his smile crooked like his hammer.

I raised the horn. "To the morning," I said. "To the feathers," said Irdís. "To the men who pay for lies," said Svala. "To the dogs who write poetry," murmured Ulf.

We drank. Mead first burns, then it heals, then it lies, then it tells the truth. I liked all four phases, some more than others. I felt my head accepting the day like a lazy civil servant: reluctantly, but with a certain skill.

Outside, rain slapped against the boards. Someone was laughing, someone was crying, someone was learning that knives are faster than decisions. I leaned against the pillar and heard the raven somewhere on the roof. It croaked three times, as if counting, and the world seemed to me like a stage on which the props were already laid out: a barrel, a boat, a village, a man with more pride than plans—and a few bored gods.

"What's next?" asked Torfi, his eyes wide, his future small. "Tomorrow," I said. "And if we're unlucky, there's more to come." "Don't you want some peace?" I looked into my horn. The mead was amber with a memory. "Peace is for people

who have nothing to say." I toasted the raven, who didn't answer. Gods only have manners when they have to.

"All right," I said aloud, more to myself than to them all. "Today we're even. Tomorrow we start all over again." I took the last sip, put the horn down, and it sounded like a judgment. "And if Odin wants something, he can get it himself." The rain nodded. The raven was silent. The village breathed as if it were a lung that had been forgotten, and I smiled. It doesn't take much to be king of your little hell: a boat, a barrel, a few curses—and the courage to wake up in the morning.

Chapter 2 - Hangover, fight, broken jaw

The day after never smells of mercy. It smells of old smoke, spilled mead, and decisions that tasted like glory at night and a mixture of cold cod and bad breath in the morning. I woke up because something was staring at me. Not a person, not a woman, not an enemy—a chicken. It was sitting on my chest, pecking at the linen with its beak, scrutinizing me as if it had just decided I was either breakfast or furniture.

"Get out of here, feathery ass," I muttered, and the beast fluttered off me, insulted. It let out another indignant noise, as if I had taken away its honor, and disappeared through a hole in the wall.

I blinked. Rows of dried fish hung above me. They swayed gently, and with each sway, they sent me a look that said, "We know what you did yesterday." I wasn't in my longhouse. I had ended up in Torfi's smokehouse—again. I don't know if it was by choice or, as so often happens, a combination of drunkenness, stumbling, and a wrong turn.

My head rattled like an empty barrel in a storm. I tried to sit up, and my back protested as if it had slept on stones last night—which wasn't impossible. One boot was missing. My left sock was wet. I smelled myself and realized: I stank of port, smoke, and a third thing I'd rather not identify.

I padded to the door. It was stuck. Normally I would have just kicked it open, but today... today I felt like I would still need my strength.

Outside, the fog hung like a wet cloak over the village. Everything was bathed in a dull gray that had eaten away the colors. A boat hung on the jetty, half in

the water, half on the shore—like an old man who couldn't decide whether to stand or sit down. A man lay in an overturned barrel, only his legs sticking out, and he snored as if he were trying to shout the seagulls out of the sky. Two children were playing "drunken spear" with a third, who lay motionless on the ground. The drunk made no attempt to get up. Maybe he was dead, maybe he was asleep, maybe both. In the background, an old woman by the well cursed the wind as if it had stolen her laundry.

Somewhere, metal struck metal—the blacksmith was already awake. And that meant trouble, even before I'd had my first sip of water.

Bjorni, our blacksmith, came toward me, as wide as a barn door and with a grin that glittered dangerously—because it shone in all the wrong places. Two front teeth were missing. The gaps gaped like small open gates through which one could see directly into his bad mood.

"Hallgrim," he mumbled, "you owe me two teeth."

I was about to reply when I noticed his new "teeth"—small, crooked pieces of metal that he must have forged himself. They looked as if he'd been trying to hammer nails into pearls.

"I told you yesterday: put on new ones made of iron."

He lifted the small piece of metal like a child proudly displaying a dead beetle. "I did it."

"And?"

He put it in his mouth. It clinked once, fell back out, and he caught it before it landed in the dirt. "Not perfect yet."

"Bjorni," I said, "you're a great blacksmith. But as a dentist, you're a damn disaster."

He laughed as best he could, without his front teeth. "Wait until I rivet them." "Better rivet a helmet. If you keep banging around in the tavern like that, your next teeth won't be made of iron, but of wood."

He was about to counterattack, but a crash from the direction of the tavern interrupted him. Glass shattered, someone yelled, and then half a door flew out of its frame.

I entered the tavern. Inside, a fight was raging between two fishermen. The reason: a barrel of herring, which was supposedly "sacred." How a barrel of herring could be sacred, no one knew—but that had never stopped anyone here from bashing each other's heads in.

One man swung a chair, the other tried to bite it. In the corner, a man shouted, "Don't drink it in the beer!" as if he'd just defended the fate of the world. I stepped in between them – and got an elbow in the ribs. So I dished it out generously. A punch here, a shove there, and soon the three of us were on the floor, laughing, cursing, and trying to choke each other.

Svala stood behind the counter, collecting coins from spectators. "Bet on Hallgrim! He doesn't pay out if he loses, though."

After five minutes, it was over. Two fishermen were bleeding from the nose, one had lost a shoe, and I was sure that the herring was now even more sacred than before.

I sat down at the counter. "Mead," I said. Svala pushed a mug toward me. "Breakfast?" "Breakfast."

I had just half emptied the cup when Ulf Aschebart sat down next to me. He smelled of smoke and a bad night's sleep. "The Norwegians are coming," he said, as if giving me a bad weather forecast.

"With what?" "With swords and stories." "Stories are cheaper." "Yes," he said, "but swords tell stories faster."

Irdís, the herbalist, suddenly stood beside us, as if she had brought the fog with her. "The sea rarely brings only fish," she said. "Sometimes it brings wolves in a boat."

"Or traders with hats that are too big," Svala interjected, polishing a mug. "Sometimes the hats are more dangerous than the wolves," Irdís said dryly.

Outside, I heard a caw. On the post in front of the tavern sat another raven—large, shining, blacker than a night without fire. In its beak, it held something that glittered in the gray light. It dropped it. The coin landed at my feet.

I picked it up. Cold. Heavy. No coinage I recognized. "Odin is giving you change," Irdís murmured. "Maybe he's just trying to curry favor." "Or he's buying your attention."

I put the coin in my pocket. Not because I needed it, but because I wanted to know why a god tips. The raven fluttered away, its shadow passing once across my cup before disappearing.

Svala leaned toward me. "The pantry is half empty." "Then no feast." "You're Hallgrim Ragnarson. If you're awake for an hour, the next feast will already be on its way."

I sighed. She was right. The village couldn't stay sober, and I couldn't save it by pouring everyone water. So I had to find prey. Fast.

"Perhaps we should..." Svala interrupted me: "Before you say it—no, we're not looting the Jarl. At least not this week."

It was one of those afternoons when time dragged on like a wet rope. Outside, the fog still hung over the bay, and inside it smelled of beer, sweat, and that sour scent that lives in every pub where someone has died—whether from a knife or from mead.

The door opened. Cold crept in.

A man stood in the frame, so still, as if he had waited for everyone to look at him. Tall, broad, his shoulders heavy as ship's planks. His wet hair clung to his face, drops running down a scar that ran across his cheek. A sword hung from his belt, the engravings of which weren't native to this area. Foreign symbols that looked as if they would move if you looked at them too long.

He took a step inside. The wood beneath his boots creaked like an old promise. His eyes were calm—not friendly, not hostile, more like the sea: waiting, examining, deciding.

"Who is Hallgrim Ragnarson?" he asked. His voice deep, scratchy, unhurried.

No one answered immediately. In a tavern like this, silence is louder than a shout. Even Torfi stopped drinking.

Then Svala grinned, slowly, as if she'd just decided to give the world a little push. She pointed her finger at me. "That one. Why?"

The man didn't take his eyes off me. "Because I'm looking for something." "And what is that?" I asked without getting up.

He paused briefly. "Barrel Seven."

My head ached, but not from the hangover. It was that other kind of pain that comes when trouble finds the door and doesn't even take off his boots before coming in.

Behind me, no one moved. Even the wind held its breath.

I took a sip of mead, put the cup down, and looked at him. "Then sit down, stranger," I said. "But if you stay, you pay. In coins... or in teeth."

He didn't smile. "I'll pay with what I bring."

"And what would that be?" He took a step closer. "Stories. And trouble."

The thought that Odin might still be messing around in my life flashed through my mind. I grinned crookedly. "Well, then you've come to the right place."

Chapter 3 - Argument with the Jarl over an empty barrel

The storm came from the west like a drunken god: loud, insulted, and with fists of rain. It pounded the roofs, ripped at the fishing lines, bit the sheep's wool, and washed the night's filth into small, shining streams that looked like sins running away. As I trudged up the steps to the Jarl's longhouse, I had saltwater in my eyes, Metrest in my stomach, and a wish that someone else could play hero today. Even death, if necessary.

I pushed open the door. Inside, it smelled of wet fur, warm beer, smoke, and people marinating their decisions in their cups. Fire in the pit, flickering light, shadows stretching like cats when they sense trouble. Half a village was there: fishermen with red hands, traders with predatory eyes, three old women with knives in their eyes, and in the middle of it all, the Jarl on his high chair, as if someone had nailed him there—probably his own pride.

To his left were two companions who looked as if they were carved from plywood and built solely to fall over in battle. To his right, a scribe with a goose quill, as sinewy as an angry question mark. And near the far wall stood—silent as a threat—the stranger from the "Crooked North Wind." Wet, broad-shouldered, a sword with strange symbols at his belt, his eyes alert. He looked at me as if he'd just decided whether to kill me later or buy me a beer first and then kill me.

"Hallgrim Ragnarson," the Jarl called, raising his cup as if it were a judgment. "You're late."

"I'll come just when the storm makes enough noise to drown you out," I said, pushing the raindrops from my brows. Someone laughed. Not the Jarl.

"Sit down," he growled.

"I'd rather stand, then I'll be gone sooner if you get boring." Another laugh, louder this time. The nave lives for such sentences; it eats them like bread.

The Jarl leaned forward. The fire drew red circles around his eyes. "You owe the village kegs of beer. Three. The ones from the Autumn Festival. You drank, you celebrated, you vowed to pay—and you didn't."

"I paid," I said. "With stories, songs, broken chairs, and the memory of what freedom feels like in your throat."

He snorted. "You can't fill stomachs with air."

"But beer can empty brains," I said. "You've proven that."

The Jarl's companions adjusted their fists. Wood cracked in the pit. I felt my temper like a good dagger: light, cool, ready.

"It's not about jokes," said the clerk, his voice as sharp as a goose quill. "It's about guilt."

"Then write: The Jarl owes the village money because he's been taking more than he's given for years. And add: Anyone who contradicts him suddenly gets into trouble with taxes."

A murmur crept through the hall. No one likes having the truth burped in their face—especially when it smells of mead.

The Jarl raised his hand. "Enough. There's no market for your sayings here, Hallgrim. Your word is yours. Three barrels. Today. Or you give me something worth three barrels. And I don't mean your jokes."

"My jokes are priceless," I said. "But I have something else: I got you your dues yesterday, even though your butt is too heavy to even get into a boat. That was Barrel Seven. Remember, Jarl? That was your bread today."

"You only did what you owed," he said. "And you screwed up by pawning it and then begging for it back. That's not virtue; that's just your way of stumbling through the day."

"Stumbling is the most honest way to dance."

The first cups clinked. In the smoke behind us, the stranger moved, barely noticeable; he shifted his weight from one heel to the other. Irdís stood at the edge of the action, her hands in her coat, her gaze on me as if she saw a knife hanging in the air and wondered only when it would fall.

"We're talking about barrels," said the Jarl, "not your poetic nonsense."

"Then let's be honest," I said. "Which barrels, exactly?"

"Svala's," said the clerk. "Three barrels of beer, outstanding since the Midsummer Festival."

Something rustled in my head. Svala. Her name smacked of iron and a smile. She had never bestowed her anger on me, only on loan. "Svala didn't ask me for money."

"Because she's smart," said the Jarl. "She knows I can get it."

"From me? Or from her?"

"From the village." The word fell like a stone into water.

I breathed through the roar of the storm. Outside, the wind howled, inside, teeth gnashed. "You want to spread it all over everyone again," I said. "Because I'm getting on your nerves."

"I want order," he said. "Even if I have to get it in barrels."

"Order is when people know where to put their hate," I said. "And you put the bucket in front of their house."

He stood up. He rarely did that; he feared his dignity might fall off somewhere as he stood up. Now he held on tight. "Not today, Hallgrim. Today you're not the clown. Today you pay. Three barrels."

"Or?" I asked.

"Or I'll pawn your boat. The..." he twisted his mouth, "...bad luck."

It fell silent. When you cut open such silence, fear drips out.

I stepped closer to the pit. "Take my boat, and you'll have war with men who row better than you can count."

"I'm good at math," he said, pointing the cup at me. "Someone like you is too much for me."

"And one like you is too many for us," I said. "We'll cut both, and what's left is the village."

The Jarl's men took a step forward. From the benches at the back, Ulf, Torfi, and two fishermen rose, sympathetic to me—or to Chaos. Chaos is the best ally: it doesn't ask why.

The stranger crossed his arms. His gaze was no longer neutral; he was alert, like a knife on a table, knowing: someone's going to need me.

"Listen," I said, my hand half-raised as if calming a dog, "we'll do it like this: You get two barrels from me—not today, but within a week. The third will settle the bill you've owed her for three winters. And now don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. You forget to pay when you lose. Unfortunately, you lose often."

A murmur, this time with teeth. Someone laughed filthily. Someone else breathed "Holy Freyja" as if they had just invented embarrassment.

The clerk found the voice first. "No evidence, no proof." He tapped the wax board with his goose quill as if he could stab me with it.

"Ask the cups," I said. "They're full of your failures."

The Jarl raised his hand, and the air obeyed him. "Your tongue doesn't always save you, Hallgrim."

"But often enough to try again."

"The two barrels in one week," he said slowly, "and the third..." His gaze slid over the crowd like a knife over bread. He paused briefly at Svala, who was leaning against a pillar as if rocking herself. "We'll sort out the third tomorrow. With her. Not here."

"You won't settle anything with her without me," I said. "If you leave half your courage with me, you can talk to her."

A muffled "Oho" echoed through the room. The Jarl's two doormen had now understood that their task was "threat." The one on the left raised his fist, the one on the right his chin. Both looked as if they were about to marry each other.

"Enough," said the Jarl, sitting back down as if he'd never gotten up. "Sit down, Hallgrim. We'll drink now and pretend there's no bill tomorrow. And then you can go home and think about how I could take your boat like a cat takes a mouse. Today I'll pet the mouse. Tomorrow, not."

I didn't sit down. I let myself fall. It was the chair opposite him, at the end of the pit. Wood groaned beneath me, as if it knew what it was getting into.

"I can drink," I said. "I can pet them, too. Threatening them... not very good. I always forget to look serious."

Cups circulated. Mead foamed. Someone started a song so off-key that even the storm outside paused for a moment to hear how not to do it. I drank. The first sip burned, the second nodded, the third told me that nothing is decided today that won't be regretted tomorrow.

"Tell me one thing, Hallgrim," said the Jarl in the tone of a man already planning his confession, "why do you always want to be against me?"

"Because you're always against us," I said. "And because it's boring just pissing against the wind."

He laughed. It rarely happened, and it sounded like a barrel had decided to become a fiddle. "You could have been Jarl."

"I'm busy."

"With what?"

"Life."

He nodded, as if I'd just straightened a broken truth. "You're going to fall."

"Everyone falls. Some do it beautifully."

Behind us, a cup crashed onto the table. A scream. The doormen lunged at Ulf; Ulf lunged at their pride. There was a lot of grabbing, a shoving, a chair flew, a table fell, and someone made the acquaintance of fire. Fire wasn't the polite type. It took whatever fell and burned. Three men yelled, two laughed, one sang even more out of tune than before, and I was suddenly in the middle of it, because the middle of it is the only place you can breathe when the world decides to have fun.

I grabbed the first doorman by the belt and spun him around his own fear. He flew into a bench like a poorly aimed thought. The second grabbed Torfi, but Torfi grabbed his ear, and the ear didn't know how to get out of such a friendship. Irdís was suddenly everywhere: water here, a curse there, a hand on his forehead there. Svala had stood on the counter and was throwing loaves of bread like stones—slapping you in the mouth before you could say anything stupid. Clever woman.

"Enough!" The Jarl stood his ground again, and this time his dignity held. His voice cut through the air. "We're not beasts. Not yet." He set the cup down as if it were a weapon. "Two barrels. One week. Otherwise, your boat. Svala and I will sort out the third tomorrow. Calm down. Sober."

"You sober?" I asked.

"I still know how to do it."

"Then it will be a rare sight."

He stared at me as if he wanted to wear my skin and see how it suited him. "You're uncomfortable, Hallgrim."

"Comfortable men drown in their sleep."

He nodded curtly, and the people took that as a signal to pretend again that this had only been a flicker of a storm. The longhouse can pretend like nothing happened—it's had practice. Wood was rearranged, cups refilled, someone blew in his ear to calm it, another stroked the table that had just broken his back. The song returned, more crooked this time, but bolder.

The stranger wasn't part of the noise. He was like a shadow that had lost its owner. Now he detached himself from the wall, approached, silent as a thought, and stopped where the fire no longer caressed him.

"You're the one with barrel seven," he said, no question.

"I'm the one who doesn't have what you're looking for," I said.

He didn't smile. "Not yet."

Irdís was there, a whisper in my ear: "He's not random. He smells of commission. Of heaven. Of coins."

"Or for trouble."

"Coins are trouble with rounded edges."

The Jarl followed the stranger with his eyes. "Who are you?"

"One who gets paid to ask questions," said the stranger. "And one who gets paid more if he brings answers."

"Then ask," I said. "As long as you don't expect me to be polite."

"Who gave you Barrel Seven?" he asked.

"Good Lord," I said.

"He gives wine, not beer."

"Then he mistaken me."

The Jarl beckoned the scribe. "Write down: stranger, uninvited, dangerous." The scribe scratched as if he had been waiting for those very three words for weeks.

"I'm asked," the stranger said calmly. "Just not by you."

"From whom?" Irdís asked, as if she were merely curious, her eyes calculating.

He tapped the strange engraving on his sword. "By a hand so far away that its name sounds like a cough here."

"Coughing can kill," I said. "Especially old men."

The Jarl leaned toward me. "You're not holding your tongue, are you?"

"Only when she's busy."

I drank. The mead had warmed and now tasted of work. I put the cup down, feeling the edges of my patience. "Very well," I said. "Two barrels, one week. Svala and you tomorrow. But not in your stable. With me. At the Crooked North Wind. Where the walls listen and the tables know how to keep secrets."

"In the dirt of the pub?" he asked contemptuously.

"In the dirt, where truth dares to take off its boots."

He thought for a moment, probably as painlessly as ever when he did something that didn't suit him. "Agreed," he finally said. "And if you don't come, I'll take your boat in pieces."

"Then you finally have something that fits your politics: Splitter."

He bared his teeth. They looked like a series of small judgments. Then he sat down and drank, a long, deep drink, as if he were trying to imitate the storm outside. The people dissolved back into their habits. A woman laughed too loudly, a man cried too quietly, someone told the story of last summer as if it weren't the same as the last ten times. The stranger took a step back, and his gaze lingered on me, like a hook that knows it'll eventually get flesh.

Svala came through the door, rain in her hair, embers in her eyes. She looked first at the Jarl, then at me, then at the fire. "I heard people are talking about my beer," she said. "Without my mug."

"Tomorrow," said the Jarl.

"Today," she said, stepping between us as if she were a clean break from a dirty day. "If you're talking about my casks, please talk about the Jarl's share. I keep records. Not on wax. In minds. And don't forget mine."

"Your head is too expensive," said the Jarl.

"Then pay him off," she said.

A few laughs were born. They were ugly, but powerful. The stranger watched all this with the calm of a man who has learned that patience is free and therefore rare.

"Tomorrow," repeated the Jarl, standing. "I've had enough. The storm will steal my sheep if I don't show it the way."

"The storm only steals what isn't tied down," I said.

"Then tie yourself up," he said, and left. His doormen followed, the clerk trailing behind, his nose in the air as if he could smell a future he wanted to claim for himself. The hall exhaled. The wind shook the rafters as if it had missed the punchline and demanded a repeat.

I remained seated, the wood beneath me warm from the argument. Svala rested her hands on the edge of the table. "You've made me an appointment with the devil," she said.

"I'll sit next to him and count his horns," I said.

"And if he has more fingers than you do?"

"Then I'll borrow some."

She smiled crookedly. "I have some left. But they're not cheap."

"I pay in stories."

"I only take coins or kisses."

"Then it'll be kisses," I said, and for a moment, there was a silence between us that smelled different from all this. Perhaps of things we can't afford.

Irdís tugged on my sleeve. "The stranger," she whispered. "He has the smell of gods about him. Or of people who play golf with them."

"Golf?" I asked.

"A thing where men hit things that have done nothing to them."

"I know that," I said, looking at the stranger. He looked back. There was a faint smile in his eyes that boded ill and seemed too good to be a lie.

"We'll talk later," he said, pulling his hood down as if the storm were now his ally. "When the night has decided who it likes."

"The night likes all who pay for it," I said.

"Then pay on time," he said and slipped out.

The wind blew in, grabbed my throat, and let go. I stood, stretching my back. "So," I said to the hall, "tomorrow, by the devil. Today we drink to hell."

"To hell!" someone yelled, and a hundred cups clinked as if they were trying to build a wall behind which we would all be safe for an hour.

I drank. This time the mead tasted of decision. The rain hissed outside, as if it wanted to put out the fire in the longhouse and was afraid it would catch fire again the moment it turned around.

Svala briefly placed her hand on the back of my neck. Warm. Awakening. "Don't bring a knife tomorrow that you don't want to use," she said.

"I'll bring my tongue," I said. "It weighs less and cuts deeper."

"Then grind them," she said, "the Jarl has ears with him today."

"I have some too," I said.

"Yours only hear when you scream."

"Today I scream quietly."

She laughed, that deep laugh that opens a door you haven't seen. "Then sharpen your tongue, Hallgrim. And don't fall."

"I always fall," I said. "But it's nice."

The storm pounded its feet on the roof beams. The fire spat sparks, like little red truths. I sat down, counted my mistakes, took a sip for each one, and knew: Tomorrow will be expensive. Today was just the down payment.

And somewhere, above the smoke, above the hall, beyond the wind, a raven fluttered. It circled as if it were painting a word that no one wanted to read, and I suspected that it was **Fault** began and with **Fate** ended.

Chapter 4 - Odin listens

The morning after the storm smelled of wet wood, cold ash piles, and the breath of men who had slept in the same room for too long. The village lay

crooked in the haze, like a sailor who sees the harbor but doesn't know if he's welcome.

I still had the taste of the longhouse in my mouth: mead, arguments, and the bitter residue of words you can't take back. The Jarl wasn't my problem this morning. My problem was my skull. It felt like someone had tried to split it open—and almost succeeded.

Outside, there was a fluttering sound. I blinked. Ravens were perched on every roof ridge. Not one or two—dozens. They stared. Some pecked at the thatch, others sat still, as if they had bought tickets to a performance.

"You have an audience," Irdís said from behind me. She appeared as she always did: silently, but with the presence of someone who would ask you questions even in your sleep. "I don't like birds who know more about me than I know about them," I grumbled. "Then get used to being uncomfortable," she said, and moved on.

I needed air. Real air, not the kind trapped between smoke and rumors. So I went to the beach. The storm had brought driftwood—thick trunks sticking out of the sand like the bones of giants.

On one of these trunks sat a raven. Large. Larger than any I'd ever seen. Its head was tilted slightly to the side, as if it were considering whether it knew me or just wanted to eat me. "Get out of here," I said, and threw a stone. It didn't move.

Instead, I heard a voice. Not in my ear—in my head. "Are you Hallgrim Ragnarson?"

I stopped. "Who's asking?"

"Someone who doesn't ask if he doesn't need to know."

"That makes no sense."

"Not much."

The wind died down. The waves stopped crashing against the beach. The fog approached, thick as a curtain, and everything that wasn't him and me disappeared.

And then he stood there.

A man, tall, cloaked in gray rags, spear in hand, one eye like an old coin slot, the other a scar. Two ravens perched on his shoulders, one with its beak open, as if telling a never-ending joke.

"You're late," said the man.

"I didn't know we were dating."

He looked me over. "You're the one who awakens the Jarl's anger and yet still sleeps in the village. You're the one who pulls loot from a merchant's teeth. You're the one who can't scare away my ravens."

"Sounds like you've been spending too much time watching me."

He barely smiled. "I see everything I want to see."

"And who exactly are you?"

"Odin."

I laughed. Not loudly, but enough for him to hear. "Of course. And I'm Freyja in winter fur."

His gaze became heavy. "I could make you believe it's you."

"Better let me sleep in."

"You will go for me," he said.

"I'm going for myself, if anything."

"You will bring what was stolen."

"From whom?"

"From those who have forgotten whom they serve."

"Sounds vague."

"Sounds like work."

"I already have work to do: drinking mead, keeping the village alive, annoying the Jarl."

"You can still do all that when you get back."

"And if I don't go?"

His eyes darkened. "Then you'll see what I see if I don't send you."

He tapped the ground with his spear. The fog lifted briefly, and I saw images: My village, burning. The Jarl, dead in the snow. Myself, at the gallows tree, the ravens on my shoulders, but this time without respect. They pecked. I felt the tearing.

Then everything was quiet again. The spear stood where it had been, as if it had never moved.

"Nice idea," I said. "Do you have one with a happy ending?"

"That's up to you."

The fog lifted. Waves crashed again, seagulls cried. I stood alone on the beach, only the large raven on the post remained. It fluttered up, dropped a black feather, and disappeared into the gray.

I pocketed the pen. Not because I believed in it. But because I knew I might have to.

When I returned, Irdís looked at me as if she had seen the fog in my eyes. "You met someone," she said.

"Just a bird that can talk." "And?" "He wants me to run errands." "And?" "I hate errands."

Svala stepped forward. "For whom?" "For a one-eyed man who thinks I'm his messenger." "Then be careful what you wear," she said. "Some messages will send you to the grave faster than any sword."

Chapter 5 - A Bet with Loki

The morning acted as if it were innocent. A thin mist lay over the bay, as if the night had left a bad beard. The boardwalks glistened wetly, the smell of fish hung between the houses like a bad joke that wouldn't die. Everywhere, hands were repairing things the storm had insulted: ropes were being retied, posts were being straightened, pride was being mended.

I trudged through the mud, which felt like guilt with gravel in it. My head was heavy, but it always was when the world had too many opportunities to annoy me. Odin had burst into my day yesterday like a pale-faced debt manager. "Bring what was stolen," he had said. Today, I took my bad mood to the bar.

The "Slanting North Wind" exhaled lukewarm beer before I pushed open the door. Inside, Ulf Ashbeard sat by the fire, stirring a pan that looked like a loaf of black bread with a cough. Torfi slept in his jacket and boots, as if he'd never known them separately. Svala polished mugs without looking—the kind of woman who sees more when she's not looking.

"You look like you negotiated with the weather and lost," she said. "I never negotiate with things that are more honest than people," I grumbled. "Mead."

She poured. The first sip was a burning yes, the second a memory, the third a promise no one can keep. I lowered the cup. Outside, ravens cawed. Inside, wood crackled. And suddenly, between the door and the shadows, stood someone I hadn't seen entering.

He was... average. Which is suspicious in itself. Averageness is a cover for monsters and accountants. A skinny man, a thin mouth that didn't know whether to smile. Eyes that knew too much and explained too little. Scraps of clothing in the gray the world uses when it says, "Go ahead and ignore me, I'll steal everything from you later."

"Stranger," Svala said curtly. "That's what people often call me," he said. His voice had the sound of silk being drawn over a knife. "I'm looking for Hallgrim Ragnarson."

"He's busy," I said. "With life."

He turned his head. "Good. Then you don't mind if I keep it short." His gaze measured me as if I were a barrel he wanted to double-fill. "I heard you like betting."

"I like bets I win."

A twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Then we have the same hobby."

Ulf cleared his throat. "We haven't been betting here since Hallgrim once bought a whole barrel..." "Ulf," said Svala. He fell silent.

The stranger approached. His shoes left no marks on the floorboards. I noticed that and didn't like it. "Three little games, Hallgrim," he said. "Word, dice, courage. Two wins are enough to get rid of me. Two losses, and I take what I want."

"What do you want?" "Something that doesn't belong to you, but you hoard it like your heart lies in it." "We only hoard bad decisions," I said. "And we share them."

"Then use something that hurts you."

"My patience?"

He smiled for the first time. It looked like a rope beginning to burn quietly. "Your word."

"My word is cheap."

"Not today."

Svala put down the cup and leaned against the counter. "If you want his word, stranger, finish yours."

He nodded politely. "First game: Word. I'll say three sentences. One is true, two are lies. You have to figure out which one is alive."

"Your dialect is a lie," Ulf growled. "Go babble somewhere else."

The stranger raised his hand, and one of the flames in the hearth suddenly stopped, as if afraid of the next breath. No one noticed—except Irdís, who appeared on the threshold like a guilty conscience. Her pupils were wide. "Don't touch it," she whispered. "That thing has teeth."

"Sentences," I reminded. "Go on."

He tilted his head as if cursing me. "First, the Jarl will be sober tomorrow morning. Second, your boat left the bay alone last night. Third, it'll start to rain in an hour—inside."

Torfi giggled in her sleep. Ulf growled. Svala blinked slowly, like a cat deciding who to scratch first.

"The Jarl sober," I said, "is an insult to reality. Point one is a lie, even one that dies willingly." The stranger nodded politely. "My boat," I continued, "only

leaves the bay when I kick it. And I was arguing with my head last night, not the surf." The stranger smiled. "That leaves number three. In an hour it'll be raining inside." I looked at the ceiling. Beams, smoke, coughing. "That's so stupid it might be true. So I'll take three."

"Good instinct," he said. The ceiling cracked. A drop broke free from nowhere and splashed onto the counter. Then another. Svala wordlessly picked up a bowl. It was raining in the "Crooked North Wind." Fine, mean, steady. Everyone stared. No one stood up, because what do you do against rain that chooses your four walls?

"One-zero for you," said the stranger. "Second game: dice."

He pulled out two bone dice. No frills: clean edges, deep eyes. I immediately disliked them. "Highest total wins," he said. "But you decide who rolls first."

"You."

He threw. Six and five. The dice grinned. "Good mood," murmured Ulf. I picked them up, felt them. Cool. Alive? I threw. Five and five.

"Your dice don't like me," I said. "Dice don't like anyone," he said. "They're just being honest."

"Again," I grumbled. "Of course. But this time..." He blew over the bones. "...a different game. Whoever rolls lower wins."

"You change the rules while running?" asked Svala. "So does life."

He threw: four and two. I threw: one and one. "Ha," I said. He shrugged. "One-one."

"One more round," I said. "Same game, but I'll bet something different: If I win, you'll disappear from my village and my shadow. If I lose, take..." I paused. "...one lie from me that you may make true. But only once."

Irdís's breath suddenly froze the room like a wall. "Hallgrim—" "Already set," said the stranger, placing the dice in my hand. "Courage is the third game. But for my sake, we'll mix it in."

I weighed the bones. They weighed me back. "Low wins?" "This time..." He smiled too kindly. "...higher."

I threw: three and three. He threw: two and one. Silence. Then a murmur. Torfi woke up because his body realized that something had just been decided that smelled of trouble.

"Two-one," said the stranger. "You win."

"So get out of here." "Already on my way," he said, bowing. As he straightened up, his face changed. For a moment, I saw a woman, then an old man, then a boy laughing too loudly. Then the skinny one again. "But I'm generous. Take my name with you: **Loki**. If you curse it, maybe I'll hear it. If you whisper it, sure."

The fire in the hearth coughed. I now noticed that the flame, which had just stood still, was breathing again. The rain stopped—inside. There was never any outside.

"You said you'd take a lie from me if I lost," I reminded him, "but I won."

"I'm not taking anything," he said. "But I'm leaving something." "What?" "A mirror." "A mirror is no big deal." "Yes, it is. For men who never look at themselves."

He stepped back. "And one word, Hallgrim. One and only. Free." "Say it quickly." "Fire consumes what you hoard."

"Not a word," I growled. "That's six."

"Numbers are insulted when you count them." The grin in his eyes was more open now, but no more sincere. "See you soon, Hallgrim Ragnarson."

He left. Not to the door. Just... out of the room. Where he had been standing, there was a trail of soot that looked like a smiling fingerprint.

"I hate him," said Ulf. "You don't know him," said Svala. "That's exactly why I hate him," said Ulf.

"He doesn't take a bet and leaves a spell," I murmured. "It's either art or disease."

"It is a warning," said Irdís. "And you gave him **alie**A promise that can come true if you lose. Do you notice how he took that with him? In your sentence."

"I won."

"Loki speaks with grammar when he can't find a tongue."

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News of the rain in the pub spread faster than the thirsty part of the village. For two hours, we were locally famous. Then another celebrity emerged: smoke. Thin at first, then thick. Not the mild smoke from the stove, but the hot, sticky kind that loves to scare.

"Shed!" someone shouted. "By the back path!"

We ran. The storage shed was on the edge of the village, open enough for the wind to favor it. On the seaward side were three tons of fish, on the landward side were wood and hay, and inside were everything one doesn't want to give up when winter comes: sacks of grain, salt, good rope, old nets that would last another year. And now above: **Fire**. Not polite. Not pleading. A laugh in flames.

We formed a chain. Ulf carried buckets, Torfi stumbled and got back up, Svala cursed so thoroughly that one could have constructed a prayer out of it. Irdís tested the wind and chimneys, shouting words not made for human ears. I rammed the door with my shoulder; it gave way, but that wasn't a good idea: oxygen is fire's favorite spice. It devoured the air and leaped at us.

"Back!" I yelled, coughing, wiping sparks from my beard. A child was standing too close; I pulled it and the day to me. There was a crash inside. A beam fell. A rat burned, ran, died, smelling of guilt.

"Water!" someone shouted, as if we'd fetched bread instead. Buckets were thrown over heads, over hands, over curses. Sparks leaped into the hedge, into a roof, into the fear.

The Jarl came, the Door People in tow, chin first. "Who did this?" he shouted. "Fire," I shouted back. "Whose fire?" **"Our"**, said Svala, and that stuck because it was the truth that nobody wants: every spark that is not remembered comes back as a flame.

We got the roof off, but not everything. A third of the supplies died of the Red Death. The rest continued to live poorly: damp, half-burned, worthless if you want to eat anything but hope. I stood panting in ash and water, smelling like a mobile stove, and counted silently. Salt gone. Three sacks of grain gone. Ropes half-melted. The good nets? Ash with knots.

"That," said the Jarl next to me, "was **your** Sheds."

"Ours," I said. "As you just learned."

"I learn quickly. And I move in faster."

"You don't pull anything. You wait until we breathe again, and then you talk about barrels."

He looked at me askance, even though we were the same height. "Interesting that you spent a lot of time in the taproom earlier, when the fire started here."

"It's interesting that you know immediately when something starts that will benefit you."

He sniffed, proud as a dog bringing back a dead crow. "I have reasons to..."
"Don't," Svala said quietly. "Not today."

He didn't. Perhaps because the wind made the decision: It twisted and tore a sparkling tongue into the hay of the neighbor's shed. More chaos. More sweat. More that feeling that the world is sawing away at your patience.

As evening fell, an anger still smoldered, like embers: dark, but alive. People stood in small groups, whispering, looking at me as if I were an answer that dared not answer. Children collected nails from the ashes. Old women counted the ravens. There were more of them than in the morning.

I sat down on an overturned barrel. My hands smelled of charred wood and a truth I didn't like. **Fire consumes what you hoard.**

"Don't say it," Irdís warned. "What?" "That he was right." I gritted my teeth.

"He's right, like a knife is right when it cuts."

"Then take it away from him." "How do you take a god's knife?"

"By making his handle hot."

Svala came, sweat on her brow, soot on her cheek. She sat down next to me, our shoulders arguing over who was more tired. "Supplies half gone. Winter half longer." "We have friends with short winters," I said. "And enemies with long cellars." "The second sounds like you."

"Not the first one?" "You're bad at asking questions."

Ulf placed a tankard in front of us. "Distilling makes you thirsty." "Everything makes you thirsty," I said, and drank. The mead tasted of wood today. And of a laugh that wasn't here.

At the edge of the charred beam I discovered it: **Anode**, into the wood**burned in**, not cut. Something about him was twisted, as if someone had walked two paths at once—and both led to the same fire. Irdís crouched down, touched him, and withdrew his fingers, even though he was cold.

"Loki-Knot," she said. "He was here?" "He's everywhere you don't want him."

I looked at the knot. It didn't seem to look away. "I won," I said into the ashes. "So did he," said Irdís. "How does that work?" "You're alive. He's laughing."

The Jarl stepped out of the shadow cast by the evening over his face. "Tomorrow," he said gently, "Svala and I will talk about barrels. Today..." He let his gaze wander over the embers. "...I'll count reasons." "For living?" I asked. "For taking."

He left. The stranger with the sword stood further back, half in the smoke, half in a question. I raised my chin. He raised it too. No words. Sometimes silence is the most honest knife.

Night came early, bringing with it the kind of tiredness that doesn't want to go to bed because it knows dreams have teeth. I stayed sitting until the embers were nothing but memories. A raven perched next to me, so close I could see its peck marks on the pole. "You want something, bird?" I asked.

He tilted his head, the glowing lump reflected in his eye. I felt my hand slide to the pocket containing the quill from Chapter Four. It felt heavy. I held it as if it were a knife, then let go, as if I had grown wiser.

"Good," I said to the bird. "Tell that one up there I'll do it. I'll bring what was stolen. But I'll also bring something else: a trick that'll make a trickster's hair curl."

The raven croaked, short, dry, amused? He flew up, taking the air with him. I stayed until the cold found me, then I stood up.

I paused in the doorway of the "Crooked North Wind." Rain? No. Only the smell of wet smoke that lingers when a shed has been reduced to ash. Svala mopped silently, Ulf was already snoring in his seat, Torfi kept watch over a mug that didn't like him.

"Sleep," said Svala without looking up. "I'm practicing." "At what?" "Revenge that thinks."

She nodded. "Don't think too long. Winter won't wait."

"He should try it," I said, my voice sounding almost friendly. "I saw it burning today. Tomorrow he can freeze."

I pushed the door shut. It was stuck, as always. I didn't kick it. You don't have to win every battle. Only the ones that matter.

And somewhere, above the charred remains, the **Loki Knot** glowing—cold, but awake. A smile in the wood, promising that this was just the beginning of something funny that no one finds funny.

Chapter 6 - First Journey into Chaos

The morning smelled of cold pitch and wet rope. A wind blew that pulled the knees of old men and the courage out of young men's joints. The bay lay there like an eye that had been open too long. I stood at the dock, my hand on the railing of the Crooked Luck, and heard the wood answering beneath my skin: We can, if you can.

"We can," I said aloud, just to be sure the gods were listening—and if not, the seagulls. Seagulls are worse. They remember.

Svala arrived with a basket as if bringing breakfast to a warring party: bread, dried fish, two small jugs of mead, which she called "medicine," and a bunch of onions, the smell of which ruins any conversation, but never the truth. "For heroes," she said. "Or for men who only pretend."

"We never pretend," said Ulf Aschebart behind me. "We are always us." He carried a barrel—not one of the good ones, more like one that pretended it had once been good—and placed it on board as if it were an altar. "Lucky beer."

"The last time you loaded lucky beer, it only brought luck to the water," said Svala.

"Water's supposed to be good for your health," Ulf replied, grinning. A trace of ash from the shed fire still clung to his beard. Ash is harder to get out than guilt.

Torfi came trotting, his boots on backward, his eyes still half asleep. "I dreamed we were walking on sand," he panted, "and the sand laughed."

"Then put the boots on the right way," I said, "then only the sand will laugh."

Irdís was already standing at the bow. She looked as if the wind were paying her rent: hood down, herbs at her belt, her gaze always slipping a little into the future. "The ravens are awake," she said, without looking at me.

I looked up. Three on the pole, two on the roof of the smokehouse, one on the rope. Too many to be coincidental, too few for a burial. "They like our harbor tax," I said.

"They like you," she said. "Today they'll decide whether to admit it."

The stranger with the sword appeared as if someone had plucked him from a shadow. Yesterday's rain still clung to his coat, but somehow he didn't get wet. "Crossing," he said crisply.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Until you have to go."

"I never have to go where others want to go."

He looked at me as if I'd presented him with a riddle consisting solely of a knife. "Pay with silence," he said. "And with two strong arms, if it counts."

I nodded. Sometimes you take people with you, not because you want to, but because history decreed it so. And I had the feeling that my history hadn't learned any politeness today.

"Cast off!" I shouted, and the Schiefes Glück pulled like an old dog who'd understood the word "walk." The water took us with a shrug. I love this moment: when the dock shrinks, people's voices drift into the salt, and the sound of the keel means more than any chatter on land.

The wind was on the left, the mood was on the right. We hoisted the sail, which had more patches than future plans, and it filled as if it were remembering what it was born for. The boat writhed, creaked, laughed in the wood. I took the helm. Ulf checked the oars like a doctor checks his patients. Torfi counted rings in the water as if reading off debts. Irdís whispered things the wind won't repeat to you.

"Target?" asked Ulf.

"Easy pickings," I said. "Small trading post south of the cliffs. Bad guard, good cellar."

Svala, who had walked with me to the harbor exit, stopped at the end of the jetty and called out, "Easy prey only comes in stories and from fools!" "We're both," I called back. "So it fits!"

She laughed. It sounded like a promise: Come back.

The first few miles were clear. Water like hammered tin plates, wind like a hand at your back, sun that acted like it wasn't there to give you wrinkles. Men began to sing, because men sing on water when they're not dying or arguing. Usually both. Ulf sang deeply, Torfi off-key, I didn't sing at all. I'll save my voice for things that listen.

The stranger sat on the mast and looked in the direction no one sees unless he knows the way. "You know this water?" I asked.

"I know all the waters that kill men," he said.

"Then you know too much."

"Knowledge is only expensive when you use it."

"I don't like using it."

"I know."

Irdís looked at him like a riddle writing itself down. "You're coming with us for a reason," she said.

"No one gets on a boat without a reason," he said. "Even death has one."

"Yours?"

He tapped his sword as if there might be an answer there. "Later."

Around midday, we saw the cliffs: gray ribs that the sea had pulled from the belly of the world. The trading post lay behind it, a handful of huts, a jetty that looked as if it had drowned once before and now had to hold everything twice over. Plumes of smoke, the stench of barrels, the gentle whine of a goat—good signs. Where goats whine, there are supplies.

"We'll keep our distance," I said. "First look, then spoil."

Ulf nodded. Torfi peered, eyes narrowed. "I see two or three figures. No sign on the pole."

"No shield is a shield," muttered Irdís.

We didn't dock. We slipped behind the long headland, leaving the sail halfway and the oars full, just to get into position, like a lynx crouching under the edges. I wanted to wait until evening tired the men's eyes.

The wind shifted, just a little. As if someone had tilted the sky slightly. The ravens—five a minute ago—suddenly became three. Two were missing. I looked up. Nothing but blue, pretending to be innocent.

"The wind has its moods," said the stranger.

"Everyone has moods," I said. "Some admit it."

The water developed wrinkles. First small ones, then ones that carried stories. The smell changed from salt to what lives beneath the salt. Someone slapped the surface with the flat of their hand, but no one was there. I felt the Crooked Luck slowing down, for no reason. The oars were in the water, as if through syrup.

"Fog," said Irdís.

Something was really rising. Not from the land, but from the sea. Thin, cold, with a taste of old iron. I know fog, which only does what the weather does. This was different. It had intentions.

"Half sail down," I said. "Tighten the rudder. Don't panic, just respect."

"I'm just panicking without respect," Torfi said, but his hands were doing the right thing. They often do that. That's what hands are for.

The fog came faster than the wind allowed. It settled around us, turning the cliffs into ghosts and the sea into a room where someone is laughing, but not laughing along. It fell silent. Not a bird, not a seagull, not a raven. Only our boat, our breathing, the yawning of the water beneath the keel.

Klopp.

I know that sound: Something big saying, "I'm here." Not the boat, not us. The other one. Ulf looked at me. "Whale?" he asked.

"If it's a whale, it's one that recently learned to read," murmured Irdís. "That one's making history."

"I hate it when the world writes and I only read," I growled.

Another thud, closer to the railing. Torfi recoiled as if someone had pulled his hair. "There was something. Hand. I swear."

"In the water?" Ulf mocked.

"Yes." Torfi swallowed. "Several. They felt...."

I looked over the side. Water like glass, but not a mirror. Deep below, something moving, but not with us. I recognized outlines, shapes that weren't shapes. Legs without bodies, arms without hands, hands without fingers. And yet fingers.

"Maren-Snare," the stranger said suddenly. His voice made no noise, but the air listened. "A sea spirit. Doesn't eat you, eats your direction. Makes you so tired that you die willingly."

"The best kind of killing," I said. "Like taxes."

"You escape," he said, "by leaving something behind."

"What?"

"The thing you don't want to let go."

"Then it's not my head," I said. "It just needs to be looked after."

"We'll talk later," Ulf growled. "We're losing momentum."

I held the wheel tightly until my shoulders burned. "Keep the rudder tight. Don't cast curses into the water, they'll be wet and come back."

A shadow appeared before us. First like a line, then like a back, then like—yes. A ship. A merchant ship, half above water, half below. It was leaning, as if it had been in a hurry and then forgotten where to go. On the deck, covered with barnacles, were two barrels that looked like presents no one had come to collect. A mast without a sail, a rope dangling into the water like an arm pretending to be safe.

"Look," said Torfi. "Easy prey."

"Prey never has the adjective it deserves," I said, but my heart leaped in a way my head couldn't control. Barrels are barrels. In a burning world, anything round and rattling is hope.

We glided closer. The Crooked Luck purred as if flirting with a cat that wanted to eat her. I saw no men, no corpses, nothing. Just the boat, pretending not to think about us, while thinking only of us.

"We're boarding," I said. "Ulf, Haken. Torfi, with me. Stranger—you stay where you don't do anything I don't understand."

"Then I won't stay anywhere," he said, and he actually stayed.

The hook caught quickly, the wood responded with a dull yes. We pulled ourselves closer. The fog breathed on us. I jumped over, landed on seaweed that had once been the deck, slipped, caught myself, and laughed for no reason. Torfi followed, Ulf behind us.

The deck sounded hollow, old, and insulted. The barrels were on the port side, strapped down as if afraid to move. I shook them. Awfully. The sound of a good winter, if you want to hear it. "Quick," I said. "Rope it around, get it over."

"Maybe we should—" Ulf began.

"Think about it later," I said. "Wear it now."

We hoisted the first barrel over the edge. It was as if someone was helping us. A force from below that made the barrel lighter than it should be. "See?" gasped Torfi. "The water owes us something."

"Water doesn't owe anyone anything," I said. "It pays in drownings."

We were halfway through the second barrel when suddenly a rope broke. Not ours. The one that held the barrel. It didn't break—it ripped open, as if someone had eaten it in half. The barrel rolled, slammed against my foot so hard my bones sang, and then stopped, as if suddenly afraid of gravity.

"Hands!" Torfi shouted. "There, between us!"

I saw the waterline. Fingers, pale as fish, clawed at the wood, slid, and resurfaced. No body, just the idea of a body. The fog took a step closer.

"Over!" I shouted. "Both barrels! Everything else later!"

We pushed, pulled, cursed in every language I could think of—two or three of them didn't like gods, three or four didn't like humans, and I didn't like the rest. The first barrel tipped over the railing and fell onto our Crooked Luck with a sound reminiscent of Christmas, if anyone here believed in Christmas. The second hung between the deck and the sea, rocking, and four pale hands held it against the bottom. Not mine, they said voicelessly.

"Cut!" I yelled.

"What?" Ulf shouted.

"Anything that holds!" I yelled back.

He cut. The rope gave way. His hands slipped, grasping air, becoming water. The barrel fell, bounced, landing half on the side of the boat, half on Ulf's thigh. He screamed, I did too, Torfi laughed, because his body knows that as a reaction to pain. Together we dragged the barrel aboard.

Then I felt it. A tug. Not in the rope, not in the sail. In the boat. As if the water were grabbing us by the ankles. The Crooked Luck lay in a grip no one had invented. She no longer pushed away. She stood still. And the merchant ship I was still standing on moved without moving. It was as if a decision had been made that we couldn't build.

"Hallgrim," the stranger said quietly from his own deck. "Make up your mind."

"For what?"

"For what you don't want to give up."

I saw the deck. I saw the barrel. I saw my boat, my men, my village, burning if I did nothing—and the fog that laughed if I did too much. I drew my knife. I cut the thin safety rope that still held the second barrel to the wreck. It wasn't much. But it was a bond that the water understood.

The handle let go. In a flash, everything fell: the barrel, my heart, my courage. Then we jumped. Ulf caught Torfi, I caught the railing, and the railing caught me back. We pushed off, almost with our teeth. The merchant ship stayed where it was: half, false, true.

"Get out of here!" I yelled. "Set sail! Raise the rudder! Don't talk!"

We did what men do who don't want to die and later tell a different story. The sail took hold, the wind helped, the fog retreated, offended, as if it had realized we were saving ourselves for later. The water slid again, as if it didn't know how to hold on.

The cliffs returned to the world, the sky did what sky does: it acted as if it had never been any different. I noticed my hands shaking. I pretended I was cold.

"Easy prey," gasped Torfi. "It wasn't that difficult."

"The hardest one is the one that looks easy," I said.

Ulf felt his thigh. "Just a bruised friend. Not a broken leg."

"Breaking a leg is for men who have time," I said. "We have other vices."

The stranger looked at me as if I'd passed a question I hadn't written. "Good decision," he said.

"I rarely make good decisions," I said. "I just decide earlier than others."

"That's often enough," he said.

Back on semi-open water, the wind picked up, as if to prove to us that it hadn't helped with all that magic. The Crooked Luck rode the waves with the confidence of a bitchy old lady. There was noise around us again: seagulls talking foul, oars in rhythm, hissing in the railing.

We opened the smaller keg. I let Ulf set the tap because he has a steady hand when his mood strikes. The first drop that trickled onto my fingers was cold. Not freshly cold. Falsely cold.

"Beer?" Torfi asked with a hope I didn't want to dissuade him.

Ulf let it flow. What came out was black. Not dark brown, not vibrant, not the color of stories. Black. Like the space between blinks when you see something bad. It smelled of nothing. And of everything. The pitcher we filled didn't steam, but my stomach did.

"No beer," said Irdís, her voice echoing as if it had just happened twice. "Water from a well that never forgets."

"Curse?" asked Ulf.

"Message," she said.

"Who sends water as a message?" growled Torfi.

"Someone who knows we're thirsty."

I took a sip. It tasted of metal, of cold stone, of a sleep that wouldn't let go. I spat it overboard. The sea took it as if it had been waiting for it.

"Tip it out?" asked Ulf.

"Not yet," I said. "Check the soil first."

We lifted the barrel, tipped it carefully, and let the black residue run into the bilge, where it collected like a bad mood. Then we placed the barrel in the sun, which wasn't there. Irdís knelt, pulled out a needle, and scratched the bottom.

"There," she said.

I saw it. Carved, not cleanly, but intentionally. A sign. Two lines crossing, but not at the angle people love. Added to that a small hook that looked like a finger saying "Come." I had seen it. Not with my eyes, but with the back of my mind. In Odin's gaze. In his spear. In the pen in my pocket, which suddenly weighed like a stone again.

"What does that mean?" asked Ulf.

"They say," I said, my voice sounding different, "that easy prey always belongs to someone else. And that now we know who."

The stranger nodded slowly. "Bring what was stolen," he quoted, not like a man, but like a mirror.

"Maybe we stole it," said Torfi.

"We're just stealing from people who hoard stories," I said. "The world likes it when stories run."

"The water just didn't like us," grumbled Ulf.

"Water doesn't like anyone," I said, "unless you're drowning. Then it takes pity. Briefly."

I took the sign with my eyes, put it in the part of my mind that collects things you'll need later to act as if you already knew something. We put the barrel back down, only now everyone knew it wasn't an answer, but a question.

The sun set, or the clouds rose, in the end it all looked the same. The cliffs disappeared behind us, the bay crept back into our lives. The wind put a few fingers less pressure on the sail. The Crooked Luck found its home.

"Shall we tell the village?" asked Ulf. "That we're bringing barrels containing nothing but fake water and bad-tempered signs?"

"We say: We bring barrels," I said. "And we don't drink from them."

"And the Jarl?" asked Torfi.

"I won't say anything to the Jarl unless he asks, without threatening me."

"He always threatens when he asks," said Ulf.

"Then I won't tell him anything."

Svala was standing at the end of the jetty again as we came in. Her hands on her hips, the look that pulls you away when you overpromise. "How was the easy prey?" she called out.

"She saw us," I called back. "And gave us something."

"Lice?" she cried.

"Almost."

We docked. The boat sighed, the wood sang, my legs realized that land is sometimes shakier than water. Men came who wanted to help. Men came who wanted to help, to be seen. Children came because they believe barrels are fairy tales. Old women came to count.

We rolled the first barrel into the tavern and placed it in the dark corner where lies mature better. We left the second one on the dock. You never leave everything in. You leave what you don't want to leave behind—today I was a good student.

"And?" Svala asked quietly as the others grew louder.

"It's not getting any easier," I said.

"It will never happen."

"And it doesn't get any harder."

"It always will be."

I showed her the symbol carved into the bottom of the barrel, and she didn't make a sound I recognized. "That's not a letter," she said. "It's a finger."

"Pointing in one direction," I said.

"It's a shame we ran into the other one."

"We always run into the other one."

"And back alive," she said. "Yet."

Irdís came and stroked the sign with her thumb, as if trying to tire it out. "This is Odin's little handwriting," she said.

"Good God, small handwriting," Ulf grumbled. "I prefer it the other way around."

The stranger stepped out of the shadow he had brought with him. "So you're leaving." It didn't sound like a question.

"I always leave," I said. "I just pretend to stay."

"Then you will find," he said.

"Finding is for people who know what they're looking for," I said.

"You know," he said.

I thought of the shed that laughed as it burned. Of the Jarl who counts what he doesn't understand. Of Loki, who juggles rules until they bite him. And of Odin, who thinks I'm a messenger, when I'm just a man who gets up in the morning and hopes that no one dies today who doesn't deserve it.

"I know enough," I said.

"That's often enough," he said again, and I liked how repeated sentences sometimes remind the world that it likes circles.

Outside, evening pushed its cold fingers into the alleys. The shed still smelled of yesterday. I closed the dive bar door and let it jam without stepping on it. Behind me stood two barrels. One full of black water, which we would pour away without it ever being gone. One full of questions. Both heavy enough to bend the night.

"To easy prey," said Svala, raising a small cup. "To difficult answers," I said, raising mine. "And to the curse slowly learning to like us."

We drank as if the sip were revealing a map. It didn't. It did what such sips do: It burned, it lied, it comforted, it remained silent.

Later, as I stood on the jetty, a raven landed next to me, not too close. He looked like he had time. "Tell your boss," I said, "to give me the travel money in coins, not in riddles."

The raven croaked. It sounded like "no" and "learn to walk." He flew away as if he were an answer needed somewhere else.

I looked at the water, which acted as if it were innocent. "If that was easy," I said to Crooked Luck, "I never want to know what heavy looks like."

The boat creaked. I took that as approval. Or as a warning. Both help.

Chapter 7 - The Nuns of Lindisfaden

The morning was the color of old tin. The bay lay still, like a knife that pretends it has no past. Since the storage shed burned, the village had been hungry for something: bread, revenge, stories, or, if necessary, anger. Anger is nourishing if you chew it properly.

"Lindisfaden," said the fisherman Hrolf, who looked as if he had half the ocean hidden in his skin. "Monastery on the flat coast. Bells, a few good souls, lots of silver in chalices. Guardians? Two men and God."

"God doesn't count," Ulf murmured. "He's always on the side of those who write."

"And today we're writing with wood and iron," I said. "How far?"

"With a tailwind and swear words: half a day."

Svala looked at me as if I were a dice that rarely shows a six but often rolls. "Don't bring anything religious that's cursed," she said. "We already have enough curses."

"I'm only bringing things we can use," I said. "And if not, I'll use them anyway."

She raised her eyebrows. "You say that about people too."

I grinned. "Most people are things that act as if they were more."

"You're no exception." She handed me a bundle of travel provisions. "And keep the nuns safe, as far as the job allows. Some of them are tougher than wood."

"Wood burns," I said, "and we warm ourselves with it." She tapped me on the chest. "Not by this fire."

The Crooked Luck glided from the dock as if she were finally doing what she was born to do. The sail billowed with a sound close to laughter. Ravens sat on the piling, acting as if they were accidents of nature. One dropped a feather, which slipped down my collar. Cool, dry, I promise.

"Good omen?" asked Torfi, the boot the right way round this time.

"Omens are like advice," I said. "Half are lying, the other half is too late."

The stranger with the sword sat down on the mast without a word. His presence was like a second blade in the belt: comforting and unsettling. Irdís examined the wind, the clouds, the water's color, as if she were pleading with a silent god. Ulf made the oars sing. We didn't sing—we saved our voices for later.

At midday, the cliffs appeared, flat and nasty; behind them, the coastline, pretending to be harmless. The closer we got to Lindisfaden, the brighter the bells became. Bright tones are often knives with polish.

"Plan?" asked Ulf.

"Land quietly, get in quickly, goblets, barrels, small crates, get out," I said. "No burning churches, no dead bodies, not necessarily."

"And if they are pious and fearless?" asked Torfi.

"Then we are impious and fearless."

The stranger looked up from his shady spot. "Sometimes the right word opens more doors than the wrong axe."

"Then tell me later," I said. "First, see if the door even understands a word."

We pulled the Crooked Luck into a small bay south of the monastery. Thin sand, shallow waves, seaweed that smelled of past lives. Women in brown robes worked in the fields. One of them raised her head and saw us. Not a scream. Just a long look that said: I see you. And I have hands.

In the courtyard stood beehives, a well, two small sheds, a large gate to the inner area. A few wooden crosses. Nothing that would frighten a man accustomed to sword work. That's precisely why it smelled like a trap: when the world seems friendly, it has its teeth on its back.

We walked up the path. I raised my hand in a peaceful greeting. The first nun, a face with lines solemn enough to affect the weather, stepped forward. "Go in peace," she said.

"We didn't come to stay," I said. "Just to take some of the blessing with us."

"Blessing is not a thing. Blessing is a direction."

"Then show me the way to the sacristy."

She smiled thinly. "There are cups there, yes. But not for hands that have just prayed to hold an axe."

"We rarely pray. Our prayers have stems."

"Then I will bless you with a club," she said and did so.

It wasn't a timid blow. It had method, shoulder, weight, and something that smelled of school. Torfi took it. "Holy—!" He fell down, got up again, laughed through blood. "They really do pray with their fists."

"Take out the bolts," another nun called. More women streamed into the courtyard. They had slings, pitchforks, and short staffs. One of Ulf's men reached for a jug on the wall. He couldn't get it—because the nun was faster. The jug shattered on his frontal bone, which briefly revealed his fortune.

"Don't pull blades," I said, "until they do." "Too late," Ulf growled, as a pitchfork pierced his jacket. He broke the handle and handed it back as if it were a loan.

We pushed them, they pushed us; the whole thing was less a battle than an honest struggle. And in the midst of it all, the bells rang—first normally, then more deeply, then off-key. As if they were hanging underwater, in a well that laughed into the earth. The ground vibrated. A humming rose from the well, a dark, dry whirring, as if stones had tongues.

Irdís paused. "Not from the sky," she said. "From below."

"There's sky down below too," I said, but my voice didn't like the joke.

The bells became drums. The sound settled in the air, heavy as wet fur. The nuns stopped ringing. Many knelt. One didn't cry; she grinned. She wasn't grinning at me, but through me. I didn't like it when people grinned at me.

"What is that?" asked Ulf.

"An invitation," the stranger said calmly. "Or a reminder."

"To whom?"

"To someone who is hungry."

The courtyard suddenly had too many shadows. Some stood where there was no foundation. One lay like a wolf in front of the gate. I blinked. It remained. Not real—not yet. But there.

"Back to the gate," I shouted, because instinct is sometimes wiser than planning. "Shield circle without shields! Back to back!"

We did it, and it helped: orders are little spells. The nuns also huddled together, but not against us. They stared toward the forest as if they had shifted the answers there.

And then he came.

Fenrir didn't break out of the forest, he stepped out of the world. There he was—tall, gray, fur like thick fire, mouth like a gate, eyes like two nails that had been burning since the beginning and never cooled. With every step, the earth trembled, not like an ox, but like something making decisions.

Not a raging storm. Rather, a cold, pure intention. He saw us—registered that we were there—and saw through us. His gaze was fixed on the wall with the

large gate. Once, his paw: wood shattered, iron groaned, and the wings lay there like dead fish.

Behind the gate: a corridor, cool, dry, too clean for this coast. The smell: oil, old metal, dust with memories. The wolf disappeared into the corridor, and everyone in the courtyard stood completely still, because some movements offend the world.

"Not after," hissed Irdís.

"Yes," I said quietly. "But I'm going alone."

"One dies more gracefully alone," remarked the stranger. "But not more wisely."

"Then come with me semi-elegantly."

Ulf started to say something, but I cut him off. "You're holding court, not heroic. If we shout, shout back. Not heroically, just loudly."

He nodded. He understands "just out loud" better than most.

The corridor was made of stone, not our stone. Once a year, a merchant comes with things you don't understand: mirrors that love you, knives that hate you, cloths that dry water even though they themselves remain wet. The corridor smelled of these things.

Fenrir didn't stand at the end; he filled the end. In front of him was a chamber; at the back wall, a pedestal; on the pedestal, a box, black, the surface neither matte nor shiny—it refused to make up its mind. Engraved on the lid: the symbol I'd come to associate with bad taste. Two lines crossing, as if ashamed, and a small hook, a "come."

Fenrir lowered his head. Not a growl. A noise that sounded more like recognition. He nudged the box with his nose, just enough to make it roll to the edge. Then he looked at me.

No deception: He saw me. Not my face, not my beard, not my poor sleep. Me, as a sum, as a lie, as a possibility. I raised my hands, slowly, as if it were a bird.

"I'm just carrying it out," I said, my voice sounding like it belonged to someone else. "It won't fall into the wrong hands."

Fenrir blinked. Once. Slowly. Then he stepped aside. Not much. Enough. A draft in the air, a place that simply didn't exist, now existed. I stepped forward, felt warmth on my face, cold on my back, reached for the box. It was cold. Not winter, not death, but the cold of a truth that hadn't been invited.

I lifted it. It was heavier than its volume. Things are heavy when memories dwell within them. I took two steps back. Fenrir growled, deeply, but not "Go away. More like, "Hurry up." I did.

"What's inside?" whispered Irdís next to me. I hadn't heard her unlock the door. Yes, unlocked it—the door had opened in her mind, which is why she was suddenly here.

"A quarrel," I said. "Between gods."

"Then hold him."

"I rarely hold on to arguments, I hold on to myself."

"Today you do both."

When we emerged, the courtyard was no longer a courtyard. It was a static question. The nuns stood in a semicircle, their heads tilted strangely, as if they were listening to music deeper than ears. Some had tears on their cheeks that didn't smell sad. Ulf and the men held their ground; no one did anything stupid—rare enough to warrant mentioning.

Fenrir stepped out of the gate behind us, remaining in the shadow of the wall. He raised his head and didn't howl. He breathed. Once. For a long time. His breath smelled of a night without fire. The nuns sank to their knees simultaneously and laid their foreheads on the ground. No one told them; their bodies knew.

"Off to the beach," I said. "Calm down. No running, no showing your back. Anyone who screams doesn't understand."

We walked. That was the most eerie thing: It walked. No arrow, no stone, no curse hit us. The nuns murmured something that sounded like a song, only without a melody. Fenrir watched us go. His eyes were no longer coals; they were holes in a ceiling through which one can see stars.

I stopped at the gate and turned around. I don't know why. Perhaps because men always look back after passing what they feared. Fenrir tilted his head a thumb's breadth. Not a nod. Approval with teeth.

Then we were outside.

The sand made those sounds that say: You're still here. Waves did the work they always do: They erased traces that could prompt stories. We pushed the Crooked Luck into the water. The box lay between my feet like a very small grave.

"Prey?" asked Ulf, without taking his eyes off the shore.

"Later," I said. "First the sea."

We pushed off. The oars took hold, the sail set, the wind said, "All right." I breathed as if I'd forgotten before. Torfi giggled, his body releasing what his head couldn't understand. One of our young men—Armod, with the good hands—began to cry, silently, as if something old were coming out of him.

Ulf nodded back toward the monastery. "Why did they leave us?"

"Because we didn't take anything that belonged to them," I said.

"We have everything that belongs to them," said Torfi.

"Not that," said Irdís, placing her hand on the box. "That doesn't belong to anyone."

"Then to whom?"

"The argument."

"I hate arguments that have no names," growled Ulf.

"I hate arguments with names," I said. "They linger."

We entered the long twilight when the sea changes its mood. The wind shifted, not hostilely, just capriciously. The waves grew longer, the oars heavier. There was little to say, and so we said too much.

"That one nun," Torfi began, "the one with the shoulders—I would have married her."

"You don't even marry your bed," said Ulf.

"I'm married to my cup," said Torfi. "We live separately, but we love each other."

"Quiet," I said. "Do you hear that?"

It wasn't a sound. It was the pause before a sound. A vacuum that says: Something's missing here. Then it came: howling. Not near, not far. Everywhere, and yet in one place. The air vibrated with it; water fell still, because even water listens when there's howling like that.

"Fenrir," said Irdís. "He marks the night. Or you."

"Me?"

"You have the box."

"I had bread today, too," I said. "Bread has never marked me."

"Bread doesn't have an opinion," she said. "He does."

The howling didn't subside; it continued, as if it were the wind that had to work today because everyone else was sick. We rowed to the beat of this howl, because it was every beat. The Crooked Luck creaked in agreement, as if it knew that boats towed by wolves capsize less often.

When the bay already smelled of us, I sat down by the box. It wasn't locked. It was resolute. You could lift the lid—but something warned me against it. Not the fear of traps; I know traps. It was more the feeling that space isn't always a place, and that what lies inside takes up space that I might need later for my own skin.

"Don't open it," said Irdís, without me asking.

"I just wanted..."

"Don't think," she said. "Feel. Does it feel like silver?"

I placed my flat hand on the lid. It was cold. Then it warmed. Not because of my hand. Because of something that didn't like being touched. I took my hand away.

"No silver," I said.

"Even."

The stranger approached. "Odin rarely sends empty boxes."

"Then he should carry them himself," I said.

"He can do a lot of things you can't. And he does things you don't want to do."

"Still, if I'm a messenger, I want a reward. Not just crying."

"You'll get paid," he said. "Later."

"Later is the currency of thieves."

"And the gods," he said. "They pay on time, but in calendars no one can read."

Svala stood on the jetty with her arms crossed and the look that undresses you when you bring too much secrecy. Children were milling around, old men pretended to want to help, old women actually did.

"And?" cried Svala.

"We are all immortal," I called back, "today."

"And tomorrow?"

"We'll negotiate that."

We hoisted the box ashore. It had gotten heavier. Things get heavier on the move when they learn they're important. I wanted to take it into the tavern—deep space, dark corner—but Irdís shook her head. "Not over wood. Stone. Cold. Dry."

"Then to Bjorni's forge," I said. "He has enough stone."

"I don't have a crate tax," Bjorni grumbled later, as the crate lay on his stone slab. "Only a hammer tax."

"Today you pay with silence," I said. "And with your eyes."

He bent over, whistled through his gaps in his teeth. "Pretty thing. Dangerously pretty. You marry someone like that, and then your mother-in-law eats her." "Is that bad?" asked Torfi. "Depends on the mother-in-law," said Bjorni.

Svala stepped closer. "Don't open it," she repeated Irdís's sentence, even though she hadn't heard it. "Not today. Not for beer."

"Tomorrow on water?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, to your senses," she said.

"It's more expensive than water here," said Ulf.

Night settled over us like a house. Some sang because singing clears the brain. Others remained silent because silence is sometimes better music. Children were carried to bed, men to benches, women to plans. I sat on the threshold of the smithy, gazed at the sea, and calculated without numbers.

Ulf sat down next to me. "We didn't burn anything," he said. "For the first time since..." He searched for the end of the sentence and found my laugh.

"We were just burning inside," I said, pointing at the box.

"Do you think Fenrir helped us...?"

"Wolves don't help. They get things done. If you happen to be in the way, you go with them."

"And why didn't he eat you?"

"Because I'm too tough," I said. "Or too bitter. Or too small for his hunger."

Ulf was silent. The wind brought the scent of seaweed and questions. I took the raven feather from my collar. It was warm. Not from me. From "later."

"What now?" asked Ulf.

"Sleep," I said. "Tomorrow, keep the Jarl busy before he keeps us busy. After that, move the chest—where, we'll know when we know."

"And Fenrir?"

"If he cries again, we'll cry back."

"We cry badly."

"Then we roar. We can roar."

Just before the first gray, the air rose and turned itself into a horn. The howling came again. This time closer. The dogs in the village avoided it; they lay down and pretended to be stones. The people listened with open eyes.

I stood up and stepped in front of the forge. Nothing to see. Only the box, lying there as if it had just walked there. I placed my hand on the lid. It didn't vibrate. It was waiting. Some things are louder when they're waiting.

"He marked you," Irdís said behind me, quietly, as if she'd paid rent for silence. "Not with blood. With direction."

"Where?"

"Inside first."

"I'm good at that. I spend a lot of time inside."

"Then take someone with you."

"For example?"

"Someone who annoys you."

"Then I'll take myself."

She gave a small laugh. "Take Svala."

"Svala doesn't bother me."

"Lie less when you're tired," she said, and we were silent for a while until the howling died down, as if it had decided that enough markers had been distributed today.

At the edge of the village, the burnt shed stood like a tooth that hadn't been pulled out. I went there because some places call to you, even if you pretend to be deaf. In the ashes, the Loki Knot still glowed—not hot, just awake. I didn't stamp it out. Some signs shouldn't be answered with the foot.

"What do we owe to whom now?" asked a voice. Svala.

"Ourselves first," I said. "Then no one who demands it."

"And the one who cries?"

"I owe it to him not to run away."

"You can do that?"

"I'm bad at a lot of things. But I'm good enough at bad things."

She nodded. "Then go to the Jarl tomorrow, as agreed. I'm in. After that..." She looked at the smithy. "After that, it's crate day."

"Crate Day," I repeated, as if it were a holiday. "Sounds like a knife feast."

"These are the best parties."

We carried the night into the houses. The village did what villages do when the sky is briefly opened: It boiled, whispered, laughed too loudly, then acted as if it had always been that way. The sea breathed. The ravens perched on the rooftops like accents. Someone played a flute badly and saved the world for a moment, because bad music is braver than good.

I lay down late. My fur smelled of smoke, salt, and wolf. I closed my eyes and saw him once more in the gate: Fenrir, as large as a decision one doesn't make. I saw the box resting on my hand, as heavy as a word spoken too soon. I saw the nuns whose fists said: We believe in God, but our hands belong to us.

"If this is God's reward," I murmured into the darkness, "I will die a heathen again."

The howl didn't answer. Sometimes even the wolf has decency.

Chapter 8 - Back with a goat and many enemies

The sky hung like a wet sack over the sea as we entered the bay. **Crooked luck** creaked with every stroke of the oar, as if it had picked up a laugh somewhere along the way that didn't belong to us. I stood at the bow, salt on my tongue, anger in my head, and the jetty drew closer like a question with no clever answer. The faces were already there: children with hungry eyes, women with gritted teeth, old men with stories they were about to stuff into our pockets, and the Jarl in boots that made more noise than action.

The first thing they saw wasn't the box. It was the goat.

Forelegs on the railing, chin up, gaze like an accountant who knows you're lying. She bleated long and hoarsely—not an animal sound, more like an insult in a language no one in the village speaks properly. The Jarl stared at her, then at me. "What. The. Thor. Is. This."

"A goat," I said.

"I see it's a goat! Why?"

"Because she came along."

"Lie!" Torfi at the helm raised his hand, almost wobbling into the water. "She came out into the middle of the sea! Whoosh—poof—goat!"

"You were drunk," sighed Ulf.

"I was still drunk. That's different."

The truth was: The return trip from Lindisfaden had already given us enough fuel for an entire winter's camp before the dock even smelled. The wind had been friendly at first, then jealous, then mad. And in the midst of madness, the horizon parted as if someone were pushing the sea open with a fingernail.

Something lifted. Longer than three dragon boats, scales black as burnt tar, eyes of cold bronze. The head was the bad mood of a god, carved in wood and come to life. The sea serpent. If you ask me: Jörmungandr himself, and I'm not famous for exaggerating when it comes to danger.

"Row!" I yelled—pure politeness. The snake came anyway. Water rose to mountains that didn't like us. Torfi took a breath to invent a fable, stumbled, and Ulf grabbed him by the back of the neck like a naughty child. Then lightning struck, so close that the hairs on my arms wondered whether they wanted to continue living with me. It struck across our bow, and in the steam he stood: Thor.

No hallucination, no mead dream. Thor: twice as tall as a man, shoulders like a rock, beard with rain in it, Mjölner in his fist. "Hallgrim!" he roared. "You're sailing like a drunken troll!"

"There was someone on board!" I shouted, pointing at Torfi.

Thor laughed, and the sea vibrated in his bones. The hammer flew—a gray thought that longs to become reality—and struck the snake on the skull. The

sound was like a bone drum, as big as the world. Water burst, the creature writhed, dove, and before I could even mouth "thank you," Thor was gone again, the thunder lingering like an offended chorus.

The men rowed twice as fast afterward, less out of fear of the snake, more out of fear that Thor might reappear and criticize them. Only the goat stood at the stern, watching the places where the monster disappeared, and bleated softly. I swear it sounded approving, as if it had weighed the hammer and found it suitable.

At the harbor, the drama really began. We unloaded: three silver chalices, a sack of copper coins, three barrels of honey beer—one of them leaking and already blessed with collected curses. No gold, no fabrics, no chest that invents songs while being carried. "Is that supposed to be loot?" asked the Jarl. "That's what you get when nuns fight like men and a wolf has the key to the treasure chamber," I said. "I'll give you supplies, men, sails—and you bring me pocket money and an animal!" - "The goat isn't mine." - "Then kill it." - "Why?" - "Because it's staring at me." - "It has taste."

The goat leaped ashore as if the ground had its name. It stole a crust of bread from a child's hand, stalked across the square, into Bjarni's smithy, climbed up onto the anvil, turned over a bucket of water, and bleated in judgment on the order of things. Svala tried a rope; the rope lasted three heartbeats and decided it was better to be a snake. "It's not a normal animal," she said. "It smells of thunderstorms and lies." "Maybe it belongs to Thor?" suggested Torfi. "Or Loki," spat Svala. "Then we're screwed."

The children gave her a new name every day: Thunderfoot, Queen, Squirrel, Goat King. Adults returned old curses to her. Day two: onto the roof of the longhouse. Day three: bit the Jarl's cloak, clean, scarce, without remorse. Day four: ate through a cabbage stash and shat in front of the tavern door as if she had an opinion about the interior.

An argument broke out in the marketplace because Bjarni's wife claimed Torfi had stolen her wood, and Torfi claimed she had stolen his mind when she looked at him. Fists grew heavy, words became stupid—perfect conditions for a small miracle. The goat stood in the middle of the circle, lowered its head, and pushed Bjarni away so cleanly that he fell backward into his stall, a basket of apples enriched the world, and the children took over diplomacy like locusts. The argument died in laughter. "The beast is worse than a mediator with a sense of humor," growled Ulf. "Perhaps she's both," I said.

At night, when the village breathed like a tired dog, I went to the smithy, where the box lay on the stone slab. The goat stood before it, motionless, only its ears moving, as if listening to music from wood. Once, it lowered a horn, placed it on the lid without pressure. There was no vibration, no twitch—and yet, in my head, I heard something that sounded like approval. I whispered, "What are you doing?" The goat raised its eyes. Pupils narrow, vertical, like slit eyes in a doorway to the wrong room. "Can I ride you?" I asked quietly. It bleated, slowly, in that hideous tone that recalls words. I understood: "Not you."

The village grew in rumors like a tree in nightmares. "Lindisfaden wants revenge! Men with swords!" - "Fenrir seeks Hallgrim! He howls in the distance!" - "The goat is cursed!" - "The goat is a blessing!" An old woman with hands like gnarled roots swore that Thor's goats pulled his cart and were eaten every night and resurrected every morning. A fisherman said if this was one of them, winter would have entertainment. "Or trouble," said Svala. "Or both," I said. "The village likes a double dose."

On the third evening, the mood changed. The Jarl arrived, not alone, with two men who looked as if they were made of boards that no one was allowed to file. "Hallgrim," said the Jarl, "you bring shame." - "I bring stories." - "Stories don't fill stomachs." - "Sometimes they do. With laughter or anger." - "I want silver." - "I have the chest." - "It's no use to me as long as it's closed." - "Then stay tuned." - "I'm curious to see if you survive the winter." - "Me too," I said, and for once we were in agreement.

The goat helped politics, as it helps everything: As the Jarl turned away, it bit the cloak again. It caught on a nail, the Jarl stumbled, his dignity fell, and he didn't immediately get back up. A few laughs emanated from small children's throats in grown-up throats.

Later, at the mead house, Torfi explained that he could ride the goat because he understood "spirit animals." I put half a silver ring against it. He managed two steps. Then the goat became a thunderstorm with hooves. Torfi flew through the air and experienced sauerkraut with all his senses. The goat stood on the table, head held high, bleating like a king whose kingdom consists of misfortune.

The sea acted as if it were finished with us, but at night the howling came. Not near, not far – from the air itself. Dogs flattened their ears, children wrinkled their foreheads in their sleep, and I stood in front of the forge and listened to the box doing nothing. Irdís stepped beside me, so quietly that the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. "He marked you," she said. "Not with blood."

With direction." - "Where?" - "Where you don't want to go." - "That doesn't narrow the map down."

The next morning, the Jarl called a meeting at the well. The wind flickered across faces as if they were thin pages. "The chest will be opened," he said. "Today. In front of everyone. Or I'll take it and open it there, where only my word counts." His men nodded, because men in armor prefer to nod rather than think.

"Not on wood," said Irdís. "On stone. Not in heat. Not in the wind."

"In my hall," said the Jarl.

"In my forge," Bjorni grumbled. "The plate can even withstand your stupidity."

"This thing stays with me," I said. "If it eats someone, it'll eat me first." - "I have a list of suggestions," Ulf murmured.

It was decided without anyone wanting to say a word. As soon as the sun licked the edges of the houses, we would lift the lid. I ate little, drank too much water and too little mead—a strange feeling—and tried not to remember the flash of lightning that had left Thor's shadow.

As people streamed into the smithy, it smelled of stone, old iron, and a strange cold. The box lay there like a quiet dog, ready to fall asleep or kill. The goat stood at the entrance. No one had called it; it came because it wanted to. It placed its horn against the lid once more, then raised it—like a referee calling the ring.

I touched the edges. Cold. Then warm. Not from my hands. From the thing. "If I say 'to,' push," I said. Ulf on the right, Bjorni on the left, Irdís close enough to whisper, far enough to survive. The Jarl stood where shadows cost.

I lifted. A crack. Nothing leaped out. No smoke, no light. Just a smell, old as wet stone in a memory. The crack grew larger, the lid heavier, as if an invisible hand wanted to keep it down. "More," I growled. The lid opened.

Inside lay no gold. No silver. No spark of the gods to consume the eyes. There was a bundle of black leather strips, neatly woven, in places with rune-like notches that weren't. In the center was a piece of bone, long, smooth as water in frost, drilled on one side as if it were a mouthpiece. A horn? The remnant of a flute? A key to a music no one had commissioned.

"That... is nothing," said the Jarl, first disappointed, then angry, because disappointed people always need someone to blame. "A ribbon! A bone!"

Irdís leaned forward. "Not bond," she whispered. "Commitment."

The stranger—I'd almost forgotten he was there, he's so good at breathing—took a step forward. "Fenrir's oars," he said calmly. The room made sounds that no throats know. "One of them. Not the big one. An early one. An... attempt."

All I understood was: It wasn't something you could exchange for coins. It was something the world was scratching at its throat. I placed my hand on it. The bone was cold and at the same time... hungry? I pulled my hand away, not out of fear, but out of respect.

"I want silver," repeated the Jarl, as if it were a prayer.

"I want to live," I said. "And sometimes one thing doesn't lead to another."

The goat now stepped forward. The people stepped back because they're smarter than they look. She sniffed at the straps, not reverently, but knowledgeably. Then she pushed the package with her snout until it was directly in front of me and bleated once, briefly and succinctly. Take it. I took it.

"What is this good for?" asked the Jarl.

"To bind or unbind anger," said Irdís. "Depends on who's holding it."

"Then give it to me," said the Jarl.

"No," I said.

It's amazing how much silence can fit into a smithy. The Jarl looked at me as if I'd peed in his beer. His men moved. Ulf moved faster. The goat lowered its head.

Outside, a howl erupted, deep, distant, everywhere. It ran through the beams, set tongues of fire on the sparks in the hearth, made nails remember they were once iron. We stood there as if we were characters in a song that was about to get more complicated. The Jarl raised his hand—and let it fall. You're no fool to stand on the edge of a wolf's cry.

I carefully wrapped the straps back around the piece of bone, placed the bundle in the box, and left the lid open. The box remained open, like an eye that wants to stay awake. "This," I said, "isn't treasure. It's a set of keys. And the doors it unlocks aren't made of wood."

The gathering dissolved like bread in soup. The Jarl left last, heavy, his teeth the loudest part of him. "One week," he said simply. "One."

In the evening, the village sat down to do what villages do when the future behaves like a knife: eat, drink, lie, love, forget. The goat jumped onto the roof of the tavern and lay down like a star that had decided to play lamps today. I went to the jetty. The wind had shed its cold and carried the weary sounds of those who had once again passed by on a day like this.

Ulf joined me, resting his arms on the ground, looking at the water as if it were saying something back. "Do you think you can ride the goat?" he asked suddenly.

"Sure," I said. "Just not me."

"Who then?"

"Someone who knows more than they say."

"Then certainly not the Jarl."

We were silent. The sea pretended to sleep. I thought of Thor and his hammer, of the serpent lurking deeper below, of Fenrir howling without breathing, and of a box that was nothing and everything. I thought of the oars in my hand. I thought of the goat and its "Not you."

Later, as I passed the forge, she was standing in front of it again, looking into the box. Her ears were moving, as if she was hearing something I couldn't. I stood beside her, and for a moment there was a silence that wasn't of this world: a small, hard, honest silence. I placed my fingers on the lid.

"If this is God's reward," I said to the darkness, "I will die a heathen again."

The goat bleated, once, so quietly it was almost a laugh. Then, somewhere outside, the wolf took flight again, and the night held on tight so it wouldn't fall over.

Chapter 9 - Drinking Mead Against Thor

The evening began as innocently as evenings in our village usually begin—with the smell of fire, grease, old beer, and the quiet hope that there wouldn't be a fight today. I had my seat at the end of the bench, my back to the wall, facing the fire, mug in hand. It was warm, a rich babble filled the hall, and I was wondering whether I could slip away unnoticed so I could wake up tomorrow with a somewhat clear head.

Then the door flew open.

Not the way doors normally open—but the way mountains break apart. The wind ripped through the smoke and voices, and Thor stood in the frame. Alive, broad as a barn, his beard wet, his cloak heavy with rain. Mjölnir hung in his fist like a casual threat. He looked around, fixed his gaze on me, and grinned like someone who already knows he's winning.

"Hallgrim!" he boomed, and a few cups on the shelf vibrated. "Your men say you can drink like a god."

I knew immediately whose mouth was to blame. Torfi was grinning in the corner like a child who'd just poked a burning hut. "I told him you're the only one who might be able to stand up to him," he said. "Maybe."

"Perhaps?" Thor growled.

"Just said it," I mumbled.

"Nothing's said casually here." He stepped forward, the floor creaking, and there was that dangerous glint in his eyes. "We're drinking. You and I. Until one of us falls down."

The longhouse transformed into an arena in minutes. The benches were pushed against the walls, straw spread on the floor—"just in case." Barrels were dragged in, jugs stacked. Ulf pulled out a long plank that served as a table and, in case of emergency, as a barricade. Half the settlement crowded in. Even the Jarl came, sat in the shade, and acted as if he were only there out of courtesy. In truth, he wanted to see me make a fool of myself in front of everyone.

"Take one!" Torfi shouted, as if he were the master of ceremonies. Two mugs filled to the brim. Thor tipped his like water, and I did the same. Cups on the table – first round a tie.

"Take two!" Voices grew louder, the fire crackled more intensely. Thor told of a contest with a giant in which the jug never emptied because it was connected to the sea. "I almost did it," he boasted. "The sea was thirsty for a week afterward." I countered with the story of Miklagard, where I drank with three merchants until we decided their women were ours. The women disagreed. I lost a bet, three teeth, and a sword.

Barrel three. The mead already tasted less like honey and more like a warm memory of honey scratching in the throat. Thor began rapping on the table with Mjöltnir. Each blow made my cup slosh. "Stop cheating!" I snarled. "I'm just tapping in time," he grinned. "To the sound of your demise."

Barrel four. Someone started singing a song—off-key, but loudly. Thor sang along, so deeply that the smoke in the roof vibrated. I sang too, and by the end we were just shouting words into the fire that sounded like songs.

Barrel five. There she was. The goat. Just there. No one had seen her come in, but she stood in the middle of the room as if she owned the place. She marched straight to an open barrel, stuck her head in, and drank. Slowly. With pauses where she chewed, as if studying the aromas. Thor burst into peals of laughter. "She's got more style than you!" he shouted. I choked, coughing mead all over the table. Half the room was doubled over with laughter.

Barrel six. Thor was sweating slightly, which was new. We continued to brag. He told of dwarves he'd thrown into mead jugs, I of a brewery so bad even the rats stayed sober. Meanwhile, two villagers were fighting because one had stolen a piece of cheese from the other. The fight ended when the goat jumped on both of them and knocked them to the ground.

Barrel seven. Thor raised Mjöltnir to tap rhythmically on the table. This time he hit too hard. The board cracked in half, mugs tipped over, and mead poured over the straw like a golden flood. The crowd cheered. "New table!" roared Torfi. Ulf rolled over the next board. "It's your fault," I said to Thor. "I call it raising the mood," he replied.

Barrel eight. That's when things got strange. The air in the room flickered as if heat were passing through us. And suddenly, another man stood there. Slender, thin, with a smile you never quite understand. Loki. "Well, little brother," he said to Thor. "I hear you're letting a human lead you by the nose." His gaze fell on me. "Hallgrim, huh? You know he doesn't play fair?" - "I always play fair," Thor growled. - "Yes, as fair as a storm."

Loki snapped his fingers – and my mug suddenly felt lighter. I drank and noticed that it refilled itself. Thor drank – and his mug became heavier, chewier, as if someone had mixed mead with pitch. He grimaced. "Stop it, Loki," he growled. "Me?" Loki said innocently. "I only help the weaker."

That was just the beginning. Loki strolled among the guests, stole cheese from someone's hand, took a sip from Thor's mug without Thor noticing, and then whispered into the ear of one of the spectators. Seconds later, half the crowd was on the benches, yelling my name and throwing bread crusts at Thor. Thor just grinned—and brought Mjolnir down so hard on the table that the new board splintered.

"Perhaps we just drink standing up?" Loki suggested, flicking his fingers again. The goat grew wings. Not small ones, but enormous, white feathers. It fluttered frantically through the longhouse, knocked over two jugs, and landed on Thor's shoulder. He tried to push it away, but it bleated right in his ear.

Loki pretended to mediate, secretly pouring a handful of pungent herbs into Thor's jug. "Spice up the finish," he whispered to me. Thor took a sip—and coughed as if he'd inhaled fire. "Tastes like... truth," he croaked, and Loki grinned so broadly that you could tell it wasn't a compliment.

Barrel nine. The hall now smelled of mead, sweat, straw, and a hint of sulfur. The thunder outside was getting closer. Thor's cheeks were red, my knees were weak. "One tankard. No need to put it down," I suggested. "First to finish, wins." Thor grinned as if he'd invited Death to the dance. We raised our tankards. Loki whispered to me, "If you drink now, you'll drink for both of us." I didn't know if that was a blessing or a threat.

We drank. The floor vibrated. Loki flicked his sip—and for a split second, Thor's mug was as heavy as a rock. He fought, I pulled through. Outside, the sky opened, thunder crashed so close that the roof shook. Thor slammed his mug onto the table—and the table we had just replaced collapsed in half again.

"Victory!" he shouted. I just sat there, smiling, and said nothing. Thor stared at me, first confident of victory, then uncertain. "Draw," he finally grumbled. "For friendship."

The longhouse was a mess. Three broken tables, straw soaked with mead, men sleeping in impossible places. The goat lay on top of a barrel, its belly round, its eyes half-closed. No wings left. The Jarl stood up, shook his head, and left the room without a word.

Thor placed a hand on my shoulder. "You may not be a god," he said, "but you're not a child either." Then he stomped out, Mjölnir loosely in his hand, and the thunder followed him like a dog following its master.

I stayed seated, my head light, my stomach heavy, and knew: Tomorrow I would die—but tonight I had drunk with the god of thunder, while Loki grinned and the sky shook. And I had, damn it, survived.

Chapter 10 - Frey's Missing Sow

I woke up with a mouth as if someone had tanned a leather boot sole in it during the night and forgotten to take it out again. My head acted as if two dwarves were forging nails inside, arguing over who could hit the louder. My back was a map of pain. I was lying half under a bench, half on a skin that smelled of goat, and, damn it: It was the goat. She stared at me from a distance that is not permitted in any friendship, bleated softly like an offended queen, and pushed the cup away from me with the edge of her hoof. Not out of concern. Out of mockery.

The nave stank of mead, smoke, rain, and regret. Above me, the smoke hung thickly like bad thoughts, and between the pews, a choir snored, conducted by no god. Ulf lay on his back in the ash bed of the hearth, his head on a blackened log, his hands clasped as if offering condolences to the night. Torfi's upper body was in the water bucket, his legs sticking out like two poorly carved oar heads. The Jarl was missing, the Thunder was missing, Thor was missing. Instead, Irdís sat on the threshold, with that gaze in which the sun had less intention than it claimed.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning is a lie," I croaked, realizing I couldn't speak. Well... I could speak. Only it came out differently than I intended: "My tongue sticks like old tar, my head's a ship that doesn't run anymore." I blinked. "What the—"

"Say it again."

"I just want water, bread, and peace. The world should be silent, and you too... you." I paused, feeling the blush of shame creeping up my beard. "I'm rhyming?"

"Yes," said Irdís, turning her head slightly, as if she were listening to a flute no one should hear. "And you don't rhyme well."

"I rhyme crookedly and senselessly—" I bit my tongue. "By Odin. If that was Loki, I'll rip the smile off his teeth."

"He was here," she said noncommittally. "*Nothere*, but right where you slept. Your words still smell of him."

The goat tilted its head and bleated in a tone that *Ah* meant and *Your own fault*.

The men awoke like eels in a bucket. Ulf sat up, spat out a spark that wasn't one, and brushed off the ash. "I dreamed I fell asleep in a stove and woke up in heaven," he grumbled. "But it was just your sawmill of snoring."

"Water," gurgled Torfi from the bucket, emerging, his hair sticky, his face the illustration *Hopes that were disappointed*. "Who talked me into a mess?"

"Loki," I said. "And my mouth is his court jester."

Ulf stared at me. "You sound like a drunken bard who's been hanged halfway across a bridge."

"Shut up, you dogs, listen to me, my mouth makes rhymes, not me... you." I grabbed my neck as if there were a thread there to pull. There wasn't. Instead, the air pulled. It pulled at someone whose humor always lingered too long.

The train door rattled. A quiet laugh, nowhere and everywhere. And then he was there, not physically, but in his presence: Loki. He was leaning in a corner that had just been a wall, smiling as if he had poisoned my breakfast and made me a sandwich next to it. "Good morning, Hallgrim," he said. "I thought I'd see you." *rhyming* again."

"I'd like to—" I raised my fist. "—beat you out of the house, without rhyme, just with a club."

"Boring," he said. "Besides, you're on a diet today: only verse. No prose for you, big guy."

"What do you want," I pressed, "you skinny fox? Say it and then piss off."

He stretched his arms. "I want you to do three small things, and then you'll be free again. Three tasks—nothing major. Amuse a god, and the god will let you talk normally again. Most of the time."

"Say it, now."

"First," he raised his index finger, "the goat wins a race against Bjorni the Blacksmith today. Officially. In front of everyone. No cheating—unless you cheat so well it's art."

The goat looked at me. I looked at her. She bleated briefly: *Do it*.

"Second," Loki continued, "you steal the Jarl's most valuable object, bring it to an old woman on the edge of the village, and don't say a bad word. In rhyme. With a smile."

"And third?" I hated how my mouth smeared everything with ink.

"Thirdly, you sing a love song to the village elder. Today. At noon. In front of everyone. A beautiful one. Without laughing and without being stoned." He grinned. "If you manage all three, you're free again. If not..." He shrugged his shoulders as if he were cold. "Then you'll rhyme until the winter is old and you're deaf."

"I'll rhyme your ears off—"

"That's the ghost!" Loki clapped softly. "Oh, and: no violence in tasks two and three. In the race... well, *few* Violence. I don't like boring stories."

He disappeared like a ghost who had been paid for. The air never cleared.

"All right," said Ulf, as if he'd ordered the weather. "Racing, theft, love song. A normal morning."

"Normal as a bear in a bathtub," I grumbled, forcing my mouth to stay silent. It almost worked. Then: "I hate rhymes that don't bite, I only like ones that pack a punch."

"Shut up," Svala said from the doorway. She'd been watching us long enough. "You sound like a traveling minstrel with scurvy. Drink this." She handed me a clay cup containing something that looked like dirt and smelled like decision. "Against the head. Not against Loki."

I drank. It burned. The world remained crooked.

Spreading the word about the race took about as long as it takes a child to steal an apple. Within an hour, they were standing at the edge of the village road: men with bets, women with comments, children with muddy legs, the goat with the calm of a murderer. Bjorni came out of the smithy, bare-chested, arms like beams, belly like honesty. "I'm supposed to race an animal?" he asked incredulously. "I have horseshoes to beat, Hallgrim."

"You run or I'll rhyme you...*move*" On," I gritted. "Besides, they're already betting, and without racing there'll be rebellion."

"Where to?" he grumbled.

"From here to the jetty and back. Whoever kisses the tavern door first wins."

"Is that goat even in the club?" someone sneered.

"The goat is a board member," Svala replied coldly.

Someone gave the signal—a scream that smelled of fun. Bjorni jumped, the earth groaned, the goat waited half a second—the *half second was insulting*—and then she leaped into action, as lightly as if the ground had been made for her. She didn't run in a straight line, she cut corners, she took shortcuts known only to goats. Bjorni gasped, the crowd roared, children ran along, fell, got up again. Ulf ran alongside, commenting like a madman: "And the goat takes the slope! And Bjorni takes... the detour! And the goat eats a cabbage in the meantime! What a tactic!"

At the jetty, Bjorni tried to cheat by taking a shortcut, jumping from the post onto a plank – the plank broke in a huff. He flopped into the water, resurfaced, cursed, and swam. The goat ran along the edge of the jetty as if it could read water. Back along the path, over two children lying laughing in the dirt, and then, at the last moment, braked –*braked!*— at the dive bar door, looked at the audience, looked at me, and grumbled once, as if to say, "Learn." Then she tapped the door with her horn.

"Victory!" shouted Torfi, almost falling into a bucket again.

"Unfair!" Bjorni yelled, half dripping, half laughing. "She's wearing heels."

"She has style," I corrected. "And you have water."

The bets were paid out, the comments grew broader. The goat ate a laurel wreath that no one had made and enjoyed it. I exhaled, wiped my forehead. One task accomplished. Two to go. My mouth was already spinning the next string.

"The Jarl," Ulf said cautiously. "His most valuable item? That's not his comb."

"His pride," said Svala. "Your life, if he catches you."

"I need something that *he* loves most," I said, forcing my tongue not to tangle. It half-obeyed. "What shines, what counts, what...*missing*, if it's missing." I hated myself for it.

"The axe on his hall wall," said Irdís. "The one with the walrus bone inlay. He calls it *heritage*."

"Or the ring he only wears on Sundays," Ulf chimed in. "But there's more opinion than metal on that finger."

"The axe," I decided. "The axe is history. And history can be given to an old woman."

"He'll love this," murmured Svala.

The Jarl's house stood there like a man who still believes his first sword was the best. Two watches that seemed like afternoons: long and uneventful. I breathed, inhaled air that tasted of anger, and didn't go through the door. I walked around the house. Beyond the hall, there was a small window that was too large to *not* try, and too small to not get stuck. Exactly my size. Ulf lifted me, I pushed myself, cursed – rhyme: "If I'm stuck here, then I'm lucky, but I want to get out and back quickly." I hated everything about myself.

The hall smelled of oil, wood, and discarded pride. The axe hung on two hooks, polished, beloved. I stepped over and placed my fingers on the handle. The axe was cold, as if it were saying to me, "I know no hand but his." I took it down, as quietly as a thief can pray, and turned around—right into the Jarl's stomach.

We stared at each other. The Jarl raised his eyebrow, which lay like a small dagger over his eye. "Hallgrim," he said calmly. "Do you want it?"

My mouth was like a snake catching itself. "I'm just borrowing the old chick for a woman who needs her." I hated myself more at that moment than I hated him.

He looked at the axe, then at me, then at the door. The guards yawned in their heads, not in their faces. "You steal from me in my house," he said quietly, "and you rhyme like a barker."

I nodded. He took a step forward, I didn't take a step back. His hand was already halfway on my forearm when the door burst open – not *the* Door, another one that led into the next room—and the goat rushed in as if it were the fateful spear of a very capricious goddess. It rammed the Jarl into the knee, not hard, just helpfully, and the man stumbled just enough to make his dignity stumble.

"Get out!" Svala hissed from outside. "Get out, or you'll die in the rhyme!"

I did what wise men do when gods are involved: I ran. Not cowardly, just fast. Through the window, with an axe and a curse. Ulf pulled, I jammed, my butt negotiated with the frame. Then I was outside, the guards saw shadows, we were shadows. We ran.

The old woman lived on the edge of the village, where the paths become thoughts and the hedges become ears. Her house was narrow and crooked, as if it had heard too many stories. She sat in front of the door as if she had been waiting for us. Her eyes, grayer than any morning, sparkled. "Well?" she said. "Does the great Hallgrim bring an old witch a bit of manly pride?"

"He brings you steel with an old sound, he brings you anger, he brings it...*long*." I gasped. "Loki bit me."

"I see," she said. "Give it here."

I placed the axe on her knees. Her hands, thin as roots, stroked the inlay in the shaft. "Built by Bjarni's father," she murmured. "Inlaid with the bones of an animal no one knows anymore. An axe that decides more than it should." She nodded. "Thank you. He'll be furious. That's healthy."

"And my curse?" I forced out. "Please."

She laughed harshly. "Your curse is a song with three verses. You sang two. One remains." She looked at me with undeserved kindness. "And the worst."

"The village elder," I said, "a love song. In front of everyone. Without stones. I... I..." The words wanted to flee, the rhymes held them in place. "I sing his heart and hope it holds, my tongue stumbles, but I...*money*..." I sighed. "I'll let it go. I'll sing it with courage, and if it hits me, then it hits me..." *good*."

"Go," she said. "Before noon. Then everyone will be awake enough to hate you and tired enough to hear."

The village elder was named Einar, and he'd been too old for what he did for eight winters. He liked to sit on the stone by the well and pretend he had nothing but time. He had everything but time. When we arrived, half the village was already there, because rumors are more punctual than the sun. Children stood at the front, women formed a semicircle with their arms on their hips, men feigned innocence. The Jarl was there. His eyes had a new edge.

"Hallgrim sings!" Torfi shouted, stretching his arms. "A love song! For Einar!"

"I sing," I said. My mouth was the enemy, my heart the drum. "I sing because Loki forced me, but I sing so that the gods...*ungen*." The first laugh came, but it was friendly. That never saves much, but it saves the first minute.

I took a deep breath. The goat stood next to me as if it were my accompanying instrument. I raised my head. And sang.

I sang of the sea that writes letters to the shores every morning. I sang of hands that hold fire in winter and nothing but air in summer. I sang of Einar, who teaches children words that fit in their mouths yet are big enough to build houses later. I sang of the day Einar couldn't close the village gate because his back wouldn't cooperate anymore – and how three boys held the door for him and laughed as if they were suddenly masters of the world. I sang of time that breaks men apart like wood, and of love that binds them back together again without asking if it will last. I sang of Einar's wife, who left three winters ago, and how since then he has filled the water jug twice, even though he doesn't need the second one, because habit is also love. I didn't sing beautifully. My tone was rough like our beach, and my rhymes stumbled, fell, got up. But they meant it.

The crowd was silent. The wind stilled the air. I saw Einar's mouth tremble, just a little, as if he'd discovered the cold. The Jarl stared at the ground as if it had just spoken to him. When I finished, I didn't know if I was allowed to live. I only knew that my chest wasn't big enough.

One second. Two. Then someone clapped, too early, too loudly. *Ulf*, of course. The crowd laughed, then clapped too. Not like after a victory. Like after something you like better than before.

"Enough drama," grumbled the Jarl, stood up—and then looked past me. Behind me stood Loki, visible only to me or to everyone, I couldn't tell. He had that sad smile he sometimes wears when he's reminded that even gods don't always outsmart the world.

"All right," he said quietly. "That wasn't a bad morning, Hallgrim." He snapped his fingers. Something in my head I hadn't noticed unraveled: a knot made of rhymes since the morning. I breathed, and the sentence that came out was just a sentence. "Thank you."

"Don't get too excited," Loki said, grinning again. "I'll leave you something. *Aecho*. You shouldn't take all your presents with you."

"What kind of echo?"

"What you *really* think, sometimes rhymes to you *despite it* Out. Only briefly. Only when it hurts or feels good. So... always."

"I hate you," I said, soberly, clearly.

"I know." He looked at the goat, who was staring at him as if they were old colleagues. "Take care of her. She knows more ways than you."

"Get out of here," said Svala.

"I'm never there," he replied, and in the next breath, he actually wasn't.

The people dispersed, as people do when something has come too close to them. Einar remained seated. I sat down next to him without speaking. He smelled of water, of old wool, of the wood he strokes every morning before starting the day.

"It wasn't pretty," he finally said. "But it was good."

"I can never do more," I said.

"That's often enough."

Ulf crouched down in front of us. "So, the curse? Over?"

I said, "The mouth is free, the mind remains wild, the rest will get better if it wants to." I sighed. "Shit."

Svala laughed. "Echo, huh? That's something we can live with. If we know you."

I stood up, my back cracking like old ice. The afternoon slid across the rooftops as if searching for a soft spot. I went to the forge. The box lay open like an eye that hadn't yet blinked. The straps, the bone, the weight in the air. The goat stood in front of it. We both looked into it as if we could read.

"Two gods in one week," I said, so quietly that only the stones heard. "A curse, three tasks, a goat who knows more doors than I do. And a jarl whose axe I've just stolen." I rubbed my forehead. "This is going to be trouble."

The goat bleated. It sounded like agreement.

"Tomorrow," I said into the box, "tomorrow I'll bring something back. Or I'll take something that's missing. We're already too far in to stand on the edge."

Night crept out from the corners. The village did what villages do when one god has laughed and another has remained silent: It boiled, it argued, it made love, and acted as if it were just everyday life. I sat down on the jetty. The sea pretended to listen. The wolf howled in the distance. I didn't answer. Sometimes it's enough not to die and still drink.

When I stood up, the goat was sitting on the edge of the plank, staring into the darkness as if waiting for something to come out of it. "Tell me," I murmured, "can I ride you?"

She turned her head toward me. Her pupils narrowed. The echo Loki had left me rose from her throat, all by itself: "Not you."

"All right," I said. "I'll run. You show."

She jumped from the jetty, landed lightly, and looked back. I followed, not like a man who knows where to go—like someone who has understood *that* He has to go. Behind me, the Crooked Luck creaked in my sleep. Somewhere in front of me, a very small, very persistent star glowed.

"If that's God's reward," I murmured, "I'll die a heathen again." The echo grinned inside me and rhymed: "But until then – much more godly noise." I snorted. "Very well. Noise then." The goat bleated in agreement, and we went home. Or into the next trouble. In this story, it was the same thing.

Chapter 11 - Berserker Courtship

The morning began like a punch to the brain. I was still lying in my fur when Torfi came in without knocking, the smell of old fish and cheap beer trailing before him, and the grin of someone who knows he's about to ruin your day. "Hallgrim!" he shouted, "you're getting married!" "I'll what?" "The Jarl's sending you to court. Gunnbjörn across the fjord has a daughter, and she only wants the wildest man in the north. We all said that's you." I pulled the fur over my head. "Why not Bjorni the smith?" "He's got a back." "And I've got brains." "Not enough to say no." He took my cup, drank the rest, and wiped his mouth on my fur. "The Jarl wants the alliance. So make yourself pretty." "Torfi, if you don't leave immediately, I swear, I'll stuff you in my water bucket and let you rot there." "Get dressed, Hallgrim. We're sailing today."

An hour later, I stood before the Jarl. He sat on his bench like someone about to send a particularly ugly pig to the slaughter. "You're going to Gunnbjörn. You'll fight if you have to, and you'll bring his daughter back with you." "And if I don't want to?" "Then Thor will." I hated politics.

The Crooked Luck lay ready, its deck sticky from the last catch, which still smelled as if it were fighting back. Ulf held the helm, Svala sat at the bow sharpening her dagger, and Torfi carried a sack full of "gifts"—half stolen, half scrap. The wind was strong, the sea rolling beneath us like a lazy bear, yet still dangerous. After an hour, we had our first argument: Torfi sang a song about a woman who killed three men for diluting her beer. Svala said he was singing off-key, Torfi said she didn't know what murder sounded like. I slammed back some mead and pretended not to be listening.

In the afternoon, Gunnbjörn's village came into view. Palisades as high as a boast, a watchtower with a man on it, looking at us as if considering where to put our boat if we were dead. At the gate stood Gunnbjörn: broad, blond, with a beard like a braided rope. Beside him was his daughter Freydís. Blond, beautiful, but there was something cold and sharp in her eyes. If she had smiled, it wouldn't have been friendly. "That he?" she asked. "Hallgrim," said Gunnbjörn. "You're the savage?" "Only when I have to." "You have to."

"Before you talk to her," said Gunnbjörn, "you must face my husband." "Which one?" "Erik!"

The hall door opened, and there he was: fur around his shoulders, scars like a torn book, eyes so wide I thought he'd forgotten how to blink. He grinned at me. "I'll knock you out today." "Maybe."

The square filled up. Children climbed fences, dogs barked, women carried jugs. Freydís sat on a barrel, her head in her hand, as if she wanted to see if I would die quickly or slowly. Erik charged. I dodged, kicked his leg out from under him – he staggered but didn't fall. Berserkers never fall the first time. He grabbed my collar, pulled me toward him, and punched me in the ear. I heard bells that weren't there. We slashed back and forth: through straw, across a table where two men were eating, until the food flew. One threw me a jug, I drank, and spat the rest in his face. He laughed and rammed me into a pile where a pig was sleeping. The pig ran away squealing, with Erik chasing after him because he thought I was in there. The crowd roared, someone shouted for me to pull out his teeth. A kid threw me a sausage—no idea why.

We went into the second round. He tried to throw me against the stockade, I spun around, and he crashed into it, making the boards shake. A dog bit his leg, he kicked it away, and the dog stole a spectator's shoe. Someone bet me loudly that I wouldn't last until sunset. I mentally bet against it. Third round: We wrestled so close I could smell his breath—and that was worse than any punch. He tried to lift me, I kicked him in the groin. He gasped, and I used the moment to bring him to his knees.

"Enough!" Freydís shouted. She stood up and stepped between us. "He's still alive. That's enough." Erik spat blood and grinned. "Not bad, Hallgrim." "Not good," I replied.

Freydís approached. "Good. You passed. Now comes the real test." "Which one?" "Skadi," she said.

Suddenly, the goddess was there. Fur around her shoulders, coldness in her eyes, as if she were staring at winter. "You want this woman?" "I want to go home." "Get me something from my lake that doesn't belong there. Then we'll talk."

We set off. The path led through a swamp that stank so much that even Torfi remained silent. An old man sat by the side of the road and said he knew I was going to die. I gave him a piece of bread. He laughed and said the bread was stale. Later, a band of robbers tried to catch us. They gave in when Svala drew her dagger. Torfi took their wine, "as punishment."

The lake lay still, black as pitch. A shield with runes floated on the surface. I waded in, the water biting into my bones. Then there was movement beneath me. A snake, as big as my boat, burst from the depths, its mouth open, teeth like daggers. It slashed at me, I dodged, stabbed with my knife, dodged. The

water boiled, it wrapped itself around me, I gasped for air. I grabbed its neck, squeezed, it writhed, whipped me against the bottom. I kicked myself free, grabbed the shield, stumbled to the shore.

Skadi stood there as if she'd never waited. "Good. You're not dead."

Back in the village, there was a celebration. And not just any celebration—half the longhouse was packed with people, tables, barrels, and sounds. Erik pressed a jug into my hand, Freydís looked at me as if she were considering whether to keep me or stuff me. "Maybe I'll marry you," she said. "Someday." "Maybe it's not enough for me." "It is for me."

Torfi climbed onto a table and began a mocking speech about Gunnbjörn's men, who supposedly could drink less than his goat. Laughter rang out, a cup flew, hitting Ulf in the ear. Ulf hit back—not the one who had thrown it, but the one standing nearest. Within a minute, half the hall was in motion. Chairs tipped over, someone ran through the commotion with a chicken under their arm, someone fell into the fire, got up again, burned briefly, laughed, and poured mead over their backs.

Freydís suddenly stood next to me. "Do you know that you have more respect here than my father?" "Respect, fear—it's all the same in the end." "I'm going to test you. Again." "I'm looking forward to it."

Erik arrived, his beard covered in foam, and placed a pitcher in front of me. "To the man who almost took my sister-in-law." "Almost?" "Almost."

The night ended with a chorus of off-key songs, three broken benches, and the goat standing on a table eating from a bucket while two men lay motionless underneath.

I knew I had survived. But I also knew this was just the beginning.

Chapter 12 - Plundering in the East

The morning smelled of cold ash, wet wool, and hope that would have been better left to spit into the sand. I stood on the beach, **Crooked luck** rocked impatiently, as if she knew we'd be carving foolish decisions into wet boards again today. Ulf checked the rudder, Svala counted arrows like other people

count prayers, and Torfi cast a look at the sky that didn't bode well, yet grinned like a man who never wrote his will.

"East?" he asked.

"East," I said. "Furs, silver, mead. And woe betide anyone who talks about morality."

"I only know moraines," said Ulf and pushed off.

The wind gripped us with rough hands. The boat rocked, the oars creaking. The two new recruits—Haki and Ketil, faces like blank slates—tried to appear useful and dropped their oars after two pulls. Svala sighed so deeply that the fjord briefly became glassy.

"If you can't do something," she said kindly, "learn it. Or fall into the water and become seaweed."

Freydís appeared as if she'd always been on board: fur over her shoulder, sword loose, eyes like frozen steel. "I'm coming with you," she said, sitting down without looking at me.

"This isn't a circle of chairs," I grumbled.

"Good," she said. "I don't like chairs. They always break when men sit on them."

The day became water and rhythm. Torfi sang, Svala cut the last verse out of his air, Ulf called the wind a wavering pig, Haki vomited, Ketil prayed to some god we didn't know. Around midday, we found a bank of clouds that pretended to be just weather and then lashed us with rain as if we were debts left unpaid for too long. **Crooked luck** took it personally, grumbled in offense, but stayed the course.

Late in the afternoon, we saw the first settlement to the east: thatched roofs, smoke rising straight like a lie, palisades merely decorative. "Light," said Torfi, and every time he says that word, something belonging to us later burns.

"No spear throwing, no heroics," I said. "In, out, breathe easy."

"Go ahead and define," he asked.

"You breathe – and no one else."

We crossed over in the haze at a shallow spot, trudging through mud that smelled like bad memories. Three fishermen saw us coming, looked away, looked again. One ran. Svala flicked a warning into his earlobe—clean, non-lethal. "We're buying," I said aloud. "With words."

The "tavern" was a room with tables that had already lived two lives: one as trees, one as confessionals. Torfi, of course, started boasting before my mouth could even utter the word "barrel." "...and then half the coast burned, and we stood in the smoke, and—"

"We are traders," I interrupted. "With a great thirst."

The innkeeper looked us over like fish on a board. "Merchants have coins."

"Traders from the West have... barter goods." I nodded to Haki, who stumbled, the bundle fell, and three rusty knives rolled to the floor like crooked arguments. The innkeeper picked one up and frowned. "This one's good for cutting butter."

"Then add butter."

It was fine for three breaths. On the fourth, someone outside yelled, "Strangers!"; on the fifth, the door flew open. Two men with axes, a woman with a pitchfork, and behind them young faces who didn't know what fear cost. I raised my hands. "No one has to die—"

Torfi threw a stool. Someone screamed. The mead barrel tipped over. And then the devil rode through the straw.

I pushed the first man into the doorframe, feeling bones not built for such acquaintances. Svala slid past me, stabbing, kicking, pulling. Ulf rammed his shoulder into the second man's stomach as if he were smashing through a door. Freydís was suddenly in front of me, a smile without warmth, her sword a cold line in the air. A young man with more courage than sense charged her; she turned before he'd finished thinking, took his weapon, and gave him back his breath—with the butt. He fell, unoffended. I didn't like her any less for it.

Outside, the village square was bustling. Chickens squawked as if they were priests; a goat dashed through the crowd and bumped into Torfi, who spontaneously adopted it. "She has eyes like my mother!" he cried, receiving a kick in the calves. Houses are patient, roofs less so: the first straw caught fire because someone—I wasn't looking at anyone—dropped a torch that hadn't

been there before. Smoke rose, thick, sweet from the hay, bitter from the pitch.

"Bridge!" I yelled. "Prey and bridge!"

The loot was whatever was within reach: bundles of furs, two small chests whose locks were insults, a barrel of honey mead, three sacks of smoked fish, a bundle of cloth too expensive for this place, and—because God has a sense of humor—a wooden god, half broken, half sad.

At the dock stood the man they called Captain: broader than his mind, an axe as big as a door, armor that saw too much. The water beneath the planks was black, still—until it wasn't. A shadow slid beneath it, as big as a bad mood. I stood in the man's way.

"Your name," I said.

"My axe is enough."

"Then I'm annoyed with you." I drew the blade.

His weapon came from above, the kind of blow that breaks winds and ends marriages. I entered him, closer than friendly, ran the axe past his shoulder, cutting the straps that held his armor together. He smelled of tallow and anus, of fear in armor. I pushed him, he staggered, didn't break. Men like him don't break the first time. Second swing, diagonal—I raised, blocked, my hand vibrating in his arm, right down to his teeth. I kicked, he staggered, the planks creaked.

The water boiled beneath us. The shadow circled, as if searching for a story that suited it. An arrow bounced off my helmet, I heard Torfi curse, Svala hissed, "Take cover!" and yanked Haki aside, who was about to die of incompetence right then.

"You go into the water," I told the man.

"You first," he said, and the axe came like a judgment.

I ducked, was beneath him, raised the blade, felt a ripping open, heard no scream—only air taking the wrong exit. His knee gave way. He lunged, stumbled. A plank broke, as if admitting his guilt. He fell forward, the axe slipped from his hand. I grabbed his belt, tried to turn him—then something smooth and cold crawled up from beneath the planks, tearing open the water

like fabric. An arm that wasn't one, a maw that was too much. He screamed now, yes. I let go. He disappeared as quickly as courage disappears when he realizes he's standing alone.

"Get on the boat!" I yelled, and this time even the dead obeyed.

Arrows buzzed, one bit flesh from my shoulder, Freydís broke the shaft without asking if I was ready. "Don't be fussy," she said. "You'll bleed yourself warm." Ulf threw the furs over, Ketil dropped half the chest into the water, and I later swore to him things that don't belong in prayer. Svala was the last one at the jetty, leaping with a leap that was more wolf than human, landing next to me, looking back briefly. "Anyone else?"

"Just mistakes," I said. "Leave them there."

We pushed off. The village suddenly seemed small, like lies in the distance. Smoke hung over the roofs; people ran between the houses, no longer following us, but toward water sources, toward children, toward what matters when the looting is over.

The water beneath us slid—no, it lurked. The shadow stopped beside us, unashamedly close. I felt it in the soles of my feet, the way you feel weather in your bones. Freydís followed its course with her eyes. "You're bringing the best friends with you," she said.

"We attract trouble like bad luck attracts hair."

"Bad luck has no hair."

"I told you so."

The wind finally caught us, as if it had decided the comedy had seen enough blood. We shot into the haze, and the arrows became memories. Torfi held the goat in his arms, the goat held his vest in its mouth, Ulf cursed the heavens, Svala tied my arm tightly so the blood wouldn't forget who it belonged to.

"Count the loot," I said, when the coast was just a thought. Haki tipped out the contents of the chests: seven silver pieces, eight half pieces, three rings without a signature, a bracelet that smelled of lies, two nuggets of amber, and a carved amulet with a face that looked like it was unfamiliar.

"We have more fur," Ulf consoled.

"And a goat," said Torfi, stroking it as if it were his conscience.

"I'd rather have two barrels of mead," I said. "And a second crew."

Freydís sat down next to me, her legs over the side of the boat as if the waves were furniture. "Not bad," she said. "But I've seen better."

"Me too," I said. "Next time we'll take the big settlement. No tavern talk. No stools."

"No heroes," she said.

"They die young." I looked into the haze. The shadow beneath us was gone—or almost gone. Maybe it was just waiting for a place where it would like us better. I hated it because it reminded me: The world is bigger than our knife.

The evening settled over us like a wet coat, but warm. The sea had forgotten its trembling, only the **Crooked luck** growled in her joints as if she were hungry for wood. We ate smoked fish that tasted of smoke and yesterday, drank too little honey mead because there was only one, and argued quietly about trivialities that would become big again tomorrow.

Later, when the men were asleep, I sat alone at the stern. Freydís was not far away, pretending to count the stars. "Why the east?" she asked, as if she didn't already have the answer in her pocket.

"Because the West is watching me," I said. "And the North is making me cold. And the South..."

"...you don't think it through."

"Never," I said. "Otherwise, life will ruin the punchline."

She was silent, then: "You didn't push that man into the water."

"I wanted it, for one breath."

"Then you are slower than your anger."

"Or smarter," I said.

"Today," she said. "They're looking to you. You have a team that will follow you as long as your back is bigger than their fear."

"And yours?"

"I'll follow you," she said, standing up. "If you're lucky, I'll be heading in the same direction."

The moon did what moons in the east do: It acted like it belonged to us until the clouds told it the truth. I lay down, my arm pulsing, my ribs aching, my head thinking: Next time, we'll take two boats, we'll infiltrate first, we'll burn later, we—

I fell asleep with a plan that would be a new scar in the morning.

We awoke in the gray that is neither night nor day. Ulf had stayed the course like a stubborn dog following a trail, Svala had re-fletched three arrows, and at least Haki and Ketil hadn't died. The wind was good, the fjord lay ahead like an open mouth.

"At home," said Torfi in a tone that was almost tender.

"Not yet," I said. "First, we hide the loot, trade the amulet for something that doesn't scream at us, and only tell the Jarl half the story."

"Which half?" asked Ulf.

"The one that makes us look better."

"That's the smaller half," said Svala.

"Then we lie generously," I said.

TheCrooked luckWe picked up speed. Behind us, the east coast remained like a curse that hadn't yet decided who it would strike. Ahead of us waited the Jarl, a box that breathed, a goat with too many opinions, gods with boredom, and somewhere beneath it all, the thing in the water that had patience.

"Next time," I said into the wind, "we'll get twice as much."

The wind didn't answer. It was just doing its job. And so was I. We headed west, laden with furs, a few pieces of silver, a silence that wasn't quite silent, and enough stories to fill a long night—if we ever get another one.

Chapter 13 - The Curse of the Redbeard Witch

The evening in the longhouse had just begun to feel like a promise: enough mead to keep the tongue warm, enough meat to soothe the belly, and enough lies to drown the memory of the East. Torfi was standing on the bench, telling another story about how he once killed five men with a spoon. I was just about to remind him that he'd rather choke himself with a spoon, when the door burst open like a jaw.

Cold rolled in, and with it the Redbeard Witch. She was taller than my mood, broader than Gunnbjörn's shoulders, and her red beard hung down to her chest like a burnt flag. Above her fur coat, bones and rune-carved pendants rattled, smelling like grave soil left open for too long. Her eyes glowed. Not figuratively—they glowed as if someone had pushed coals behind her pupils.

"Hallgrim," she said, and my name sounded like it was being weighed. "You have insulted Yggdrasil."

Torfi whispered, "How do you insult a tree? Do you pee on it?"

"Quiet," Svala interrupted.

The witch stepped up to our table. The bones in her cloak clinked like bad coins. "You spilled the Norns' potion in your drunken stupor," she snarled, "three drops of mead meant for a thread. They seeped onto a root. This is a crime that the axis of the worlds feels."

"Yggdrasil is not a trunk," Freydís said, without looking at the witch. "It is the world tree. Its roots reach to Hel and Mímisbrunn, its crown supports Asgard. Everything in between lies."

"Thank you, teacher," I grumbled. "Now what?"

The witch stretched her hand over the embers. The smoke came to her like a dog. "Until you have done three things, whatever sustains you will rot: First, defeat an Aesir in combat. Second, make a Vanir laugh. Third, steal a splinter from Yggdrasil's root. If you fail, your name will fall silent. You will be undone."

The embers crackled. Someone swallowed. I accidentally laughed. "A shopping list from hell. Nice."

"It's begun," she said. And left as if she had never come. The cold stayed and ate into our bones.

That night I realized she hadn't lied. I dreamed of a tree taller than my fear: Yggdrasil, so tall it could hold the sky three times over. An eagle perched in the crown, so still its silence was noise. At the roots lay a snake, black as deep sea water—Níðhöggr, its teeth like rakes. And Ratatoskr, the accursed squirrel, ran by my ear, hissing nasty things that weren't of this place. The tree breathed. I breathed with it. When I jolted awake, my mouth tasted of earth.

By morning, my sword was rusty, as if it had endured a long winter. The mead had gone stale in the jug before Torfi could even say "Cheers." The village goats steered clear of me in a way that looked more like a circle. Haki, one of the new lads, reflexively crossed himself with something that wasn't a cross. Svala just nodded, as if she'd expected the curse. Freydís gave me a look that said, "You wanted gods. Now you have them."

On the third day, Thor came. No warning, no whirlwind, he was simply there—the doorway shrank, the room too. Mjölnir hung casually from his fist as if it were a toy. "I heard you were looking for a fight," he grumbled.

"I'm looking for my life back," I said.

"First step: fight." He threw the hammer to a child who wasn't planning on playing hammer catch. Mjölnir hovered a finger's breadth above his hands. Thor winked, and the hammer floated back obediently. Then the thunder god looked at me as if I were a barrel. "No iron. Words and wrists."

We placed our forearms on a table, one that hadn't seen the world that was about to come toward him. Arm wrestling. Fool's work. Thor's hand was warm as an oven, mine cool as the lie that followed. "Three breaths," he said. I nodded.

He pushed. The table creaked, the planks squealed. I held on. The tendons in my wrist sang a pitiful ballad. Thor grinned. I gritted my teeth and slammed my body against it, not boastfully, just nastily. The table gave way first. We crashed through the wood, mead splashed, Torfi laughed like an idiot, Svala rolled his eyes. I lay beneath Thor, who laughed. Then he put his hand on the back of my head, pressed my forehead against his, and the smell of rain came as close to me as if I'd drunk it. "Good," he whispered. "You didn't win. But you didn't run away. That's enough for the curse." And he was gone. The door remained intact. The wood too, somehow.

At night, I smelled of roots again. In my dreams, the Norns Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld wove threads that wouldn't break, even though my name pulled at them

with filthy fingers. Ratatoskr raced back and forth between Eagle and Níðhogg, bearing insults that were too sharp even in dreams. When I awoke, my hands had dirt under their nails.

The Vanir—that was more difficult. Njörd came out to sea. Of course he came out to sea. Fog lay like sticky cotton wool on the surface of the water, so thick that the boat was an insult to physics. Suddenly, a man stood barefoot on the water, a cloak of gull feathers, his eyes salty as the wind. "Hallgrim," he said, "make me laugh, or I'll take you to the bottom."

I started with Torfi's spoon story. He nodded politely, as if he were the groom's father. I tried the Jarl and his armor, which he'd once worn backward. One corner of his mouth twitched. Then I sang. I can't sing. I sang anyway—a sea shanty so off-key that seagulls would have drowned if seagulls could listen. Njörd laughed. Not loudly. But genuinely. He wiped his eyes. "That was so bad it was good." He took a step forward, which the sea took for him. "Now fish me out your curse."

The third point. Yggdrasil. No joke, no arm, no song.

Freydís stayed in my hut that evening. Not out of affection; out of vigilance. She sat by the post, drinking silently; I drank too quickly. "If you die," she said as I took the last sip, "I will remind the Jarl that he liked you. Once."

"He liked my prey," I said.

"And your impudence." She stood up. "Sleep."

I slept. And fell. And landed beneath a sky that smelled of lye. Before me, Yggdrasil, the world tree. Not large—larger than language. The bark wasn't wood, it was history. In its veins ran not sap, but memory. The crown swallowed stars, the roots held rivers that weren't water. At one root, a fountain glittered like an eye—Mímisbrunn, the knowledge that drinks you. Further down: Helheim, cold, still, relentless. At the deepest root, Níðhogg stirred, and his breath was old. The crown—an eagle so motionless that time dripped from it. Between them, Ratatoskr, the poisonous ball of fur, darted, sowing strife as if strife were fertilizer.

"Splinter," Ratatoskr whispered in my ear. "Just a piece. Small piece. Big problem."

"If I take it, something will break," I muttered.

"If you don't take it, you'll break." The bastard laughed.

I climbed down the root. It pulsed, slowly, like a heart too old to run, but too proud to rest. I drew my knife—it looked like a toothpick compared to this world. I looked for a spot where the wood was already cracking. A tiny vein. I applied the blade.

A voice: "Not there." I turned around. Three women stood in the shadow of a fiber. Urd, Verdandi, Skuld—the Norns. Not pretty. True. They looked at me as if I were an earthworm who claimed to be able to change the weather.

"Here," said Urd, pointing to a spot that looked like a smile in the wood. "That's where it hurts the least."

"It'll still hurt," said Skuld. "It's supposed to hurt."

"I don't want a war against your roots," I said.

"You're already waging war against yourself," said Verdandi. "Do it. But quickly."

I breathed. I cut. Not a large chip, just a splinter, thin as the edge of a curse. Yggdrasil trembled. Not angry. Awake. A rushing sound ripped through the crown; the eagle raised its head. Níðhöggr lifted his body, mud and time sliding from his scales. Ratatoskr snapped at my earlobe, in joy or malice, I don't know. The splinter was in my hand. It was warm.

"Run," someone said, maybe me, maybe the tree. I fell. Or the world jumped. Or both.

I kept watch in my hut. Freyðís sat where she had been. Only her gaze was different, as if she had seen further than I had. "You're bleeding," she said, pointing at my hand.

I opened my fist. A splinter lay inside, dark, with veins that never stopped moving. My palm was cut. The blood looked like it belonged somewhere else. The room smelled of earth older than our village.

Outside, the wind howled as if it had understood something. I stepped outside the hut. The Redbeard Witch stood in front of the longhouse. Her beard glowed. Her eyes were no longer coals—just tired.

"You did it," she said. Not praise. A fact.

"I'm not the axe I was," I said, not knowing why.

"You were never an axe," she said. "You were always a scar." Then she raised her hand. Something detached itself in the air, a web I hadn't seen, a spider I hadn't felt. It ripped. My head grew quieter. The beer tasted like beer again. Someone laughed in the longhouse, and it no longer sounded like they were laughing at me.

"The curse is gone," said Torfi, who suddenly appeared next to me. "Then we can drink."

The witch smiled—for the first time. It wasn't a friendly smile. It was one that knew. "The curse is gone," she said, "but the gods have heard you. And Yggdrasil now knows your grasp." She stepped back. The wind blew into her cloak, and for a heartbeat, I saw not fur, not bone—I saw roots. Then she was gone. Not gone. Gone.

We drank. Not out of joy. Out of respect for survival. Svala held back, Freydís drank like someone who wants to stay sober, to see what happens if the others fall. Ulf told how the mist had clung to Njörd's ankles. Haki and Ketil stared at me as if I were now even more dangerous—or useless. I didn't know.

That night, I placed the splinter in the box in Bjarni's forge—with the straps and the bone we don't understand. The splinter lay there as if it were breathing. Bjarni came in, wiping his hands. "I don't like the wood."

"Me neither," I said.

"We're keeping it," he said.

"Naturally."

Outside, the wind beat against the palisades. I stepped outside. Above the fjord, the sky hung heavy, but not hostile. I thought of Thor and his laughter, of Njörd and his poor judgment, of the Norns and their guidance, of Yggdrasil beneath my fingers. I thought of the eagle who ignores me, and of Níðhögg, who will not forget me. I thought that my name had not fallen silent today—only grown louder in ears I do not wish to serve.

Freydís stepped beside me, silently. "And now?" she asked.

"Now we wait until someone curses us, insults us, or invites us again."

"Or all three." She looked at the dark water. "The Aesir will return. The Vanir too. And the cattle beneath the fjord—the one that wants to count our corpses—will not tire."

"Me neither," I said. "Not yet."

She snorted. "You're a bad hero."

"Luckily," I said.

The night smelled of rain. Laughter drifted from the longhouse, genuine laughter. Not malicious. Lively. The goat bleated somewhere, probably kicking someone who deserved it. I placed my hand on the wrought iron door behind which the splinter lay and felt something answer—not a word, not a promise. Just a breath. Old. Broad. Patient.

"If that's the price," I muttered, "I'll keep paying."

The wind said nothing. But it stayed. And so did I.

Chapter 14 - One dead too many in the boat

The morning was cool and honest. So honest that it told me what I didn't want to hear: We were too tired for the sea, and the sea was never tired for us. I stood on the beach, the **Crooked luck** rocked with that offended creak that boats make when they suspect they're about to be accused of lies. Ulf checked the rudder, Svala counted arrows, Torfi counted excuses, Haki and Ketil counted each other like loaves of bread. Freydís stood by, fur around her shoulders, face like a closed door.

"Just a short trip," I said. "Set the nets, trade two crates, and go home. No gods, no curses, no heroes."

"So we're already lying on the beach," said Svala.

We pushed off. The fjord was glass. The oars left traces that looked like sins no one confessed. Seagulls screamed as if they were priests. After an hour, the talking was over. After two hours, Torfi started singing again. After three hours, Svala stepped so close to his foot that he lost control.

The first problem smelled. Not of fish, not of tar. Of something that had remained silent for too long. Beneath the tarpaulin, between the barrel and the rope, lay a body. Not one of us—we could count, especially bodies. This one was slender, salt-encrusted, his hair like seaweed, his skin gray as the sky with anger. Runes were carved into the back of his hand, old, dirty: **Ran**. He was smiling there, with scratches and something that looked like a "bind"—two lines that didn't like each other. Around his belt hung a leather pouch containing two silver coins and a lump of amber glowing in the shadows.

"Who the hell is that?" asked Ulf, sounding as if the devil was a solution.

"One dead man too many in the boat," said Svala. "That's the answer."

"We throw it overboard," suggested Torfi. "Clear, simple, elegant."

Freydís kicked the toe of her boot against the tarpaulin, just hard enough to prevent the dead man from protesting. "When Rán puts a man in your boat, you don't throw him like a rotten mackerel. You give him what he has with him, and you speak what you still know." She took the bag from him, weighed the two silver pieces, and held the amber up to the light. "This isn't a coincidence."

"Maybe Loki has a sense of humor again," I murmured.

"Loki always has a sense of humor," said Svala. "The question is, who laughs last?"

We dropped the tarpaulin again. The dead man stayed where he was, as if he had time. The wind increased, first a friendly squeeze, then a grip that counted ribs. We set sail. The coast became thoughts in the haze, the birds suddenly fewer, as if they had held a council and decided against us. The water took on a strange skin—smooth, but not good; as if it were concealing something too big to show.

"We're going too far out," Ulf grumbled without turning around. "The smell is changing."

"After what?"

"After the end."

I would have laughed at him if the air hadn't suddenly made that faint cracking sound wood makes just before it breaks—only it came from a distance. The horizon was no longer an arc, but a line, so hard as if someone had carved it

into the sky with a knife. Above it, a bright seam, not like light—like a thread. Threads, many, thin, faintly glowing, as if somewhere up above in the world a tree were dripping its stories into the room. A chill ran down my spine, even though the wind was warm.

"Back," said Svala curtly.

"Just one more piece," I said. "What's the point—"

"Don't finish that sentence," Freydís interrupted. "You don't always have to challenge what wants to eat you."

Ulf pulled the rudder, just a touch, and the **Crooked luck** obeyed—until the sea decided we were fun. A pressure grabbed our stern, not wind, not current, more like a hand sticking behind the boards and pushing. The boat turned, not completely, just enough that the sail was misaligned and the mast growled.

The seagulls were gone. The air tasted of metal. The dead man under the tarp seemed to have gotten heavier, even though that wasn't his job. The bright fringe on the horizon was now wider, and something could be heard—not thunder. A crash. Like water that no longer wants to be the sea.

"The edge," said Haki, his voice thin.

"The world is not a bowl," said Svala. "It is..." She broke off, because words aren't always there when you need them.

"She's a record, my father said so," squeaked Ketil.

"Your father couldn't even hang a door properly," Ulf growled. "Shut up and get me the hurricane rope."

It was too late for wisdom and too early for courage. The pull "outward" grew stronger, not like a current—like intent. We were gliding toward something we didn't want to see, but stared at nonetheless: where the bright hem hung, water was tumbling. Not down, not anywhere. It was tumbling—as if the world were bubbling over at the edge, and what fell made no sound I recognized, but one I would never forget.

"Drogue," said Svala. "Now. Barrel, canvas, lines. Go."

"We'll cut the jib down," Ulf shouted. "Tail it athwart, not point it. If we don't get the bow out, we'll be driftwood."

"Take off the dead weight," gasped Torfi, grabbing the box.

"Not the box," I snapped at him. "That stays. Barrel of mead, yes. Straps, if necessary. But the box stays."

I don't know how many sins you can cram into a minute. We figured it out. Torfi and Haki ripped half a barrel dry – honey mead flowed like a sacrifice no one wanted to bless – Svala and Freydís slit the reserve sail, knotted lines, and built a sea brake on the run that would have brought tears to any boatbuilder's eyes. Ulf yelled rowing commands that in any other life would have meant "left, right," but here were something like "be here later / be here later." The mast bent, the rigging sang, the bow rose, fell, rose again – and the thunder of the world's fall was no longer a sound, but a state of being.

The dead man under the tarpaulin rolled forward as if he had an opinion. Freydís was faster than everyone else, grabbed the bag with the two silver pieces and the amber, knelt down, tore back the tarpaulin, and looked into that ancient, salty face that no longer belonged to anyone. "Rán," she said, quietly and without mockery. "Take what's yours and leave what's mine." She pressed the two silver pieces into the man's hand, clamping the amber between his fingers. Then she nodded to me. "Speak."

I'm not a priest. My prayers are curses with decency. "Rán," I said. "The sea always has more teeth than we do. Take this man. There are too many of us for you, but too few to die. Let's go, and I'll drink to you when I breathe again."

"Bad liturgy," growled Svala.

"I don't have anything better," I said, and we lifted the tarp, tipping the dead man over the side of the boat at the exact moment Svala's emergency drogue caught in the stern. The boat shook, almost like human skin when the blade is sharp. The drogue took the undertow—not all of it, but enough to turn "falling" into "sliding."

"Across!" Ulf yelled. I yanked on the rudder with him, my shoulders blazing, the bow beginning to tilt in the undertow. The water beside us turned gray, then black, then... nothing. Not empty. Nothing. There was no name for it. The bright seam was a handspan away, and I swear on everything that's crooked: I saw threads in the white, thin lines that looked like Yggdrasil dripping into the night.

"If we make it," panted Torfi, "I'll write my name on the drogue."

"If we don't make it, the Drogue will write your name on you," Svala snarled and continued lashing.

The boat lurched sideways, as if it had learned how to walk in fear. The mast screamed, a rope snapped with a sound I felt in my teeth. Haki slipped, Torfi clawed at his fur, but only got fur. Haki slid further, caught the runner, hung halfway out, didn't scream. Freydís was already there, lying flat, an arm like iron, grabbed Haki by the wrist, pulled. Her teeth pressed her lip until it bled.

"One more breath," Ulf shouted. "Two more."

The world roared in offense. The boat lurched around as if it had slapped someone in need. The drogue whirred, the lines sang—and then we were out. Not safe. Out. The thunder slipped behind us, the bright fringe thinned, the sea regained that bad behavior that gives me hope.

We drifted. No one said anything, because words would have been cheap at this point. The wind struggled through into a breeze that tasted like water. After a while, Torfi coughed at the silence. "Has anyone seen my cup?"

"He fell over the edge," said Svala dryly.

"The world has eaten my cup," lamented Torfi with genuine sadness.

"She wanted better taste," Freydís murmured.

We pulled the drogue in. It wasn't a pretty piece of work anymore, but it had done what we wanted it to do, only better. The mast was still standing, the keel was there, the chest was there, Haki was there, Ketil was paler than a human should be. Ulf sat at the helm looking as if he'd lost a wife and slapped a god.

I stepped forward to the bow. The line, the hem, the drape—everything was distant again, like a story you tell children so they stop asking questions. I raised my hand, not in greeting, but more to feel the air. It was salty again, not metallic. Good.

"Who was the dead man?" Haki finally asked.

"One of Rán's," said Freydís. "Or one Loki shoved onto Rán's table to give her something to laugh about."

Svala pulled the map from under the bench, the one I'd secretly pulled from my tote bag before we gave it to the sea. Stringy, stiff with salt, lines that suggested more than they showed. "This doesn't lead 'anywhere.' It leads out."

"Out, out," echoed Torfi. "I want to go in, in."

"We're going home," I said. "We're drinking. We won't keep quiet, but we won't boast either. The Jarl will get half the truth, half the loot, and a full look."

"And the map?" asked Svala.

I took it from her, rolled it up, and put it in the box—next to things that breathe, even though they're made of wood. "The card is a lie I'll need later."

"You're going there again," Freydís stated, not as a question.

"I drive everywhere I shouldn't," I said. "It keeps me young or makes me old, depending on the weather."

"Or it'll wear you out," said Ulf. He smiled crookedly. "But not today."

The return journey was quiet. Not silent. Quiet, as men are quiet who have counted their heartbeats and still have one more to pay. We drank what the world had left us—not much, but enough to moisten our tongues. Torfi paused once, looked back over his shoulder, as if he'd forgotten something. "I think I didn't say goodbye to the rim."

"Say it quietly," Svala advised. "He has ears and a bad temper."

When the palisades of our village appeared as jagged peaks in the gray, I exhaled as if I had lost a competition I had survived. People waved, a few. From a distance, you couldn't tell how loudly someone screamed. We started to **Crooked luck** scraped the keel against familiar earth, the seagulls screamed again like priests who know where the collection plate belongs.

The longhouse smelled of smoke and stories. The Jarl looked at me as if he wanted to know if I'd lied before I even opened my mouth. I gave him what I always gave: a half-truth that didn't need the whole lie. "Nets set. A barrel lost. Two half-lives gained."

"And the dead man?" Freydís asked later, as we stood in the shadows where voices are quieter.

"He belongs to the lake," I said. "Like we all do at some point. He was just more impatient."

She nodded. "And the card?"

"A souvenir of a decision I don't make," I said.

"You lie badly, Hallgrim."

"I'm still practicing."

Night crept over the rooftops. No sound came from the box in the forge, but a feeling as if wood were remembering. In the distance—far away—I thought I heard a dull thunder, like water wanting to go somewhere it shouldn't stay. Maybe it was just my heart.

"To Rán," I said into the cup before drinking. "To Njörd. To everyone who didn't eat us today." I raised the cup again, just for myself. "And to the rim. May he forget us."

He won't do that. But I can lie if it helps. And tomorrow I'll leave again—not there, not right away, not immediately. But out. Because there are only two directions in this world: out and away. Today we left. That's enough. For now.

Chapter 15 - The Great Winter Feast

Winter squatted over the village like an old, heavy god who had decided he wouldn't rise again until someone cut a whole ox out of his belly. Snow lay over everything, in the fences, in beards, in brains. Even the fjord had held its breath, and that was never a good sign. But in the longhouse, the air hummed. Yule celebrations. Rauhnacht (Twelve Nights). Time to drown out the world with smoke, fat, and stories, so that whatever rides outside would bypass us.

They had set up the Yule tree, and it was no joke: a real trunk, cleanly peeled, rammed upright into a barrel full of stones, reaching up to the dark beams. From it hung things the older generation called "trinkets" and the younger generation called "loot": dried apples, small boat carvings, amber discs, bone coins with runes carved into them, a few colorful ribbons, whose woven material it was best not to ask. There was no star on top, but a wooden sun wheel—blackened with soot and painted with blood. It bobbed gently when

the smoke drifted, as if nodding to someone known only to the tree. Torfi wanted to put a goat on top, "for luck." Freydís raised the poker wordlessly. He found luck elsewhere.

We burned incense until our eyes burned. Mugwort, juniper, elderberry—three scents that interlocked like teeth. The old people walked silently past the house, letting the smoke creep into the corners as if they were marshaling an army. No one hung out laundry, not even Svala, who usually handled rules like a blacksmith with soft iron. In front of the house, torches burned in iron forks, crackling, sputtering, casting long shadows across the packed snow. And during the night, someone had secretly placed a straw goat in front of the entrance—the Yule goat, with a coarse rope around its horns, as if it were only briefly tethered. Torfi swore he hadn't built it. That was the joke.

Inside, the feast swelled like a flood. Meat in bowls that still sizzled as if it remembered its former life. Stews so thick a spoon wouldn't move even when begged for it. Loaves of bread as big as shields. Cheese that smelled like it had intentions. Barrels that were more commonly called "stores" than "drinks." I lifted the largest horn—it was a thick, heavy bone with stories written on it—and the mead ran down my fist, sweet yet biting at the same time. "God Jul!" I roared, and the hall acted as if all the wolves with teeth had briefly stepped out of the woods to join in the roar.

We ate until knives became blunt. We drank until songs were born that should never have been born. We made noise to drown out fear. On the Rauhnächte, the veil is as thin as an old blanket: If you're not loud, you'll hear what's coming through. So we were loud. Ulf drummed the beat with his knuckles, Svala whistled so loudly that the dogs under the bench began to sing, and Freydís stood there like a piece of brass held over the embers—hard, warm, patient. Haki and Ketil, the newcomers, clung to the wall as if afraid that the night itself would otherwise push them in the back.

Part of Yule is when everyone tips their year into the hall. Not the pretty version, but the one with a blood crust. Otherwise, the old people say, the year only remembers your lies. Ulf stood up and told of Miklagard, how he lost so much silver in a bathhouse there that when he came out he was richer in debt. Svala talked of cards with smiling kings and how smiling kings in the wrong hands become knives. Torfi wanted to boast, got tangled up in reality and ended up with an embarrassing encounter with a chicken that had pecked him awake. I told of the edge—the bright seam, the thunder that isn't thunder, the pull that isn't called a current, and the feeling that the world has a mouth

there. Some laughed, the way you laugh when you've hung on to mead too long. Others listened so quietly that the sparks in the fire were louder.

Then the women brought out the oracles. An onion, which they cut into twelve rings, one for each month. They put salt in it – and tomorrow they would see which rings drew water. "Those are the months that will eat you," said the old woman with the three stumps of teeth, smiling lovingly. Freydís brought a bowl of water with ice floating in it; a raven feather hung in the ice. When she rose, it was said that Odin was sending messengers. She rose, slowly, as if someone were sweeping beneath her. "Something's coming," murmured Svala, and I said nothing because the air suddenly felt as if it needed to save space in my lungs.

The Yule tree creaked gently. Maybe from the smoke. Maybe because something was looking at the ornaments. Mead bubbled on the apples, which some idiot (me) had sloshed against them. The sun's circle above slowly turned east, stopped, turned back, as if negotiating with a wind we didn't feel. And then, because Raunächte find their own rhythms, the ghostly circle came. At first, you only notice it by the silence in between. Then the shadows have faces. Not like in a fairy tale; more like bad memories that have lain in a barrel for too long: watery, but recognizable. I saw my father. Not the blow—the face he had before. And Kjartan, who has lain in ice for five winters. He raised his cup as if drinking to my health, which he had never cared for in life. I raised mine. For a moment, the mead tasted of the bog we left it in. I kept drinking. The trick is not to stop when things get bad. You drink until it's clouds again.

Outside, a dog barked once, as if unsure whether to try a second time. The torches cast shadows longer than the space in front of the door. And then the hooves. Not from around here. Metal on stone, yet we only had frozen earth here. A whooshing, as if arrows were peeling the night. The wild hunt. No one moved. No one stood up to close the door. No one was foolish enough to move the only thing between us and them. Nevertheless, it opened. I swear: not because a hand pushed it. Because the night decided to pass through here. A blast of snow came in, and in it, riders, tall, with helmets that weren't helmets, and eyes too old for faces. A spear slid like the moon across ice. One looked at me—long enough for my heart to understand how short its beats can be—and grinned. Not friendly. Not hostile. Only: "I know you by now." Then the door closed again. The laughter returned like a tidal wave that doesn't care about the tide.

Someone shouted "Sing!", someone else shouted "More meat!", and the hall was once again wallowing in the animals. Torfi jumped onto the table, stepped into the bowl of root vegetables, slipped, and was gone as if the Yule goat had

eaten him under the table. Ulf picked him up by the collar as if he were a wet child and set him back like a piece of furniture. Svala counted to three with the knife in her hand and got what she wanted: quiet. She can make better noise.

The Yule goat made his entrance. At first I thought he was just straw. Then he moved his head, slowly, as if someone were turning the horns from the inside. Children shrieked, adults pretended not to believe anything, yet pulled his legs off the ground. The billy goat stomped—yes, stomped—up to the Yule tree, lowered his head, and rubbed a horn against the edge of the barrel. Metal squeaked. "Who the hell tied sinew underneath it?" growled Ulf. No one said anything. The billy goat bleated. That wasn't a billy goat bleating. That was an old sound, one that had teeth even when the first goats were still eating stones.

Freydís stepped forward, held out her flat hand, a slice of bread on it. "Eat this and go," she said calmly. "Today it's our turn. Tomorrow you can go again." The billy goat pushed the bread from his hand, jerked his head up briefly, and sniffed the tree as if considering whether apples and wood offered the same resistance. I was ready to take the poker if he decided. He didn't decide. He turned and, without becoming logical, was gone. Later, Torfi swore he saw a thin slipper under the straw. "Someone was in there." - "Or something needed someone in there," said Svala. And we let it go, because you don't finish some jokes if you want to sleep later.

The oracle continued. The onion drew water in its rings for spring and late autumn. "Harvests will be tricky," the old woman hummed, placing her hand on my chest. "You too." "I'm never easy," I said. She grinned. "No man who employs the gods is easy. Just short-lived." In a corner, someone whispered dreams: During the Rauhnächte, dreams count double. One saw himself in a boat that cast no shadow. One saw a woman with golden hair whose teeth were made of ice. One saw only darkness and woke up crying. Ulf nodded—dreams are the only thing he takes seriously, because they're your own mouth when you sleep.

The argument came as arguments come: without reason, but on time. A merchant from the neighboring village reached for an apple on the Yule tree, "just to taste," he said, grinning as if he were still of the age where the world allows him to taste. Svala got there first, hacking so close to the apple with the blade that the skin slipped off only out of fear. "Not today," she said. He laughed, shook his head, said something about "peasant magic," and Ulf stood up, without a sound. The merchant was fine, until he wasn't. A shove, a silent

breath, and suddenly he had Ulf's fist in his stomach—not serious, just instructive. He went down like a barrel with bad frost.

That could have been it. It wasn't. A cousin who looked too much like him jumped up, and Torfi, who'd been hoping for three horns that someone would give him a reason to strike, jumped too. Two men, four fists, three tables that suddenly became bridges, and the Yule tree in the middle of it all, like some holy idiot who thinks people realize the seriousness of the situation. The sun circle above spun faster. "Not the tree!" I yelled, which makes about as much sense as saying "left" to a storm. Torfi slammed a punch to my cousin's chin so hard that the cousin needed the tree to avoid saying goodbye to the next month. He grabbed the trunk. The barrel creaked. A stone bounced, rolled, hit Ketil in the foot. Ketil howled, ripped at the fabric—one of the amber coins tore off and flew into the bowl of water and ice containing the raven feather. The feather dived like a rower who's tired of rowing.

The Yule tree swayed. One heartbeat too many. I jumped, not heroically, just in time, put both arms around the trunk, and cursed the pants off the entire Pantheon. Ulf was beside me, shoulder against the wood. Svala unhooked the blade and reached for the barrel, Freydís braced her knee against the edge. Together we were suddenly people who didn't want the sky to fall into our soup. The tree held. The barrel held. The sun circle above stopped and slowly rotated into the position in which the ancients later said it had "stood correctly." I don't know what is correct when wrestling with a tree. I only know: It didn't fall.

The fight continued anyway. Tables tipped over, someone made the wrong face with a cup in their fist, someone pulled someone's hair that wasn't hair, and a dog refused to give up a sausage. I yelled until my own voice no longer echoed, and then I yelled more quietly, which usually helps. Freydís climbed onto the bench, whistled, and the sharp sound cut through the hall like a very thin knife. "Sit down," she said, cool as frozen iron. "Or I'll explain which bones aren't built for movement." They sat down. Not all of them voluntarily. The cousin wiped his nose, looked at the tree, looked at Freydís, and said nothing. Good.

Later, much later, when the fire was only the place where coals remembered they had once been flames, a man I didn't recognize at first crept up to the hearth. Gray beard, one eye, cloak, spear. There's always that moment when you think you've noticed him, and then you realize he's been there for a long time. He raised a cup, took a sip, and let the rest drip into the fire. It hissed as if someone had burned a very small snake. "God Jul," he said without a tongue,

his mouth barely moving. I raised my horn. It was empty. I pretended it was full. He nodded. Then he was just an old man again, freezing.

Even later, I went outside. The Yule goat stood upright again at the entrance, completely still, as if no one had ever been inside it. The torches were short, small flames that swayed wearily in the wind. The sky told the truth: black, cold, full of stars. A thin veil hung over the fjord, as if someone had forgotten to breathe there. During the Rauhnächte, the world isn't silent; it hums. Inaudibly, but you can feel it in your teeth. I softly said "God Jul" into the snow, and the snow responded with coldness. That is its language.

When I returned, the hall was asleep like a battlefield meadow after the retreat. Bodies in the straw, bones on the table, horn in hand, hand on heart. Ulf was still half-awake, knife in fist, as if enemies were politely knocking. Svala lay with her back against the trunk of the Yule tree, as if holding it with her breath. Torfi had wrapped the Yule goat rope around her arm and was snoring as if trying to compete with the wind. Freydís was a shadow beside the fire, her eyes half-open, like someone who never fully sleeps when others are breathing.

I lay down between the bench and the trunk. The smoke crept over us like an animal that should live elsewhere but finds food here. In the distance—not far, but not from the hall—I heard the hooves again. Not a thump. A rhythm. As if riders had decided not to break down a door today. In my head, something answered that looked like a root and sounded like old wood. Yggdrasil? Perhaps. Or just the cracking in the Yule tree, leaning along through the night.

I dreamed what one dreams during the Rauhnächte when one isn't afraid enough to stay sober: of a tree holding the stars on its fingers; of a rope going over an edge where water falls without reaching the bottom; of a spear pointing at my shadow and saying "not yet." I saw the onion rings filling with water—spring and late autumn; I saw a hand pulling on a deck of cards, and the kings smiling at me. I saw the Yule goat stepping over a line no one can see, and on the other side, there was smoke.

When I awoke, the hall was gray and blue from the morning, which here isn't day, just a different kind of black. My mouth tasted of cinnamon no one had used, of smoke no one had smoked away, and of a laugh I hadn't quite heard. I sat up, my bones cracking like wood in the frost. The Yule tree stood. The sun's circle above had shifted a tiny bit, just enough that the old people later said, "the year has turned." The Yule goat was gone. Outside, we found its tracks:

two horn hollows in the snow, a rope print that had no beginning, and small, very small footprints that someone insisted they hadn't made.

We ate what was left. It was a lot. We drank the rest. It was a little. Ulf pretended he'd been asleep. Svala pretended she didn't judge anyone. Torfi pretended he didn't love the Yule goat. Freydís didn't pretend at all. She stood by the trunk, put her hand to the wood, and listened. "The tree remembers," she said. "So do we."

I nodded. "Good luck," I said into my cup. "For those who ride and those who stay. For those who lie so the truth doesn't freeze. For those who hold the tree when all the idiots run."

No one raised a toast. We drank anyway. That's the way we live. And the Raunächte took their share and left us ours. For now. Tomorrow the rings would say what they had to say, and someone would misunderstand and be right. But today the Yule tree stood. Today we roared in winter's ear until it looked away in annoyance. Today the Wild Hunt rode past our house and just smiled. That's enough. For a new year that's already standing at the door with dirty boots.

And in case anyone asks if we were thinking of the gods during this: We invited them. Some didn't come. One was there. The others lay under the table as if they'd had too much of the wrong mead. I raised the horn once more, empty like a lie you'll need later, and said to the air that hung between us: "Stay as long as you want. But if you want to take us away—not today. Today we celebrate." The air said nothing. But it stayed. And that was all you can ask of the air.

Chapter 16 - Odin wants a favor

The morning smelled of cold ash and bad promises. Snow crunched against the post, the wind held the air, as if it wouldn't release it until someone paid. I stood in front of the hut, held my breath, watched it freeze, and thought I was done with the gods for the day.

Then there was a croak. Once, twice. Two black dots landed on the ridge like bad omens with feathers. One tilted its head, as if considering whether my left eye would make a better ornament. The other pecked at the edge of the frost, as if testing whether the world was solid enough to stand on. "Huginn," Freydís

said behind me. "And Muninn." I nodded. I liked ravens. They're honest scavengers. They only come when you're lying down. Today they came first.

"Inside," I said. "Fire up."

In the nave, the Yule smoke still hung in the beams, so low you could push it away with your hand. Ulf sat there like a piece of furniture, Svala peeled the morning glory with a knife, Torfi did what Torfi always did: He disturbed the silence so it wouldn't consume him. I raised my hand, he kept his mouth shut, and that was the only magic I know.

The man didn't enter. He was simply there. As if the hall had swallowed him years ago and spat him out today because it felt sick. An eye, a cloak like night, a spear that shortened the space. No thunder, no song. Only silence, which suddenly had meaning. "Odin," Ulf said crisply, without getting up. Freydís placed her hand on the Yule log, as if wood might help. Svala didn't even flinch. Torfi tried to think herself small.

Odin walked over to the embers, holding his hand over them as if he were counting what was still warming us. The ravens were now perched on the crossbeam, staring down like two bad accountants. "Hallgrim," Odin said, and my name sounded older than me. "I need a favor."

"I have had bad experiences with invoices written upstairs," I said.

"You have good experience with survival." One eye remained still. Something stirred in its depths that needed no flame. "In Jötunheim sits one who knows more than is good for him. Hrímnir. He carries a vow in his mouth, frozen in a tooth. I need a splinter of it."

"Pulling teeth from giants?" said Svala. "Sounds like clean hands."

"I don't want a whole tooth," Odin said, without looking at her. "Just a chip of it. A piece of oath. Bring it to the bridge."

"Which bridge?" asked Torfi, and I hoped he didn't mean it the way it sounded.

"The first of all bridges," Odin said, as if it were an address. "Bifröst." As he said that, the smoke suddenly smelled of metal. "Heimdall recognizes this." He held out a bundle to me, a knot of leather, tight, with runes that looked like they had teeth. "Don't touch it. Don't open it. Hand it over. Take the shard. Hand that over too. You go, you give, you go."

"And I get?" I asked.

"Time," he said. "Not for you. For everything. And enough for you to notice."

"What's the price?" asked Freydís.

"Always the same." His mouth smiled toothlessly. "One breath."

"My breath?"

"Yours counts." One eye saw me, and suddenly I knew what he meant: breath, which you need when you smell fear.

"What if I say no?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

"Then someone else will ask." He twirled the spear, and the sound was so quiet that the hall amplified it. "But the world will ask you anyway."

He turned to leave, paused. "When you feel the flame beneath your feet, don't stop." He glanced briefly up at the ravens. "When the horn calls, remember where you stood." Then he was gone. Not a footstep, not a wind from the door. Just less cold.

"We're going to the giants," said Torfi, trying to make it sound like he'd been there before.

"We're going where everything is bigger than our understanding," said Svala. "So get used to looking and being silent."

We set off as midday pretended to pass by. The snow wasn't deep, just heavy. That's the worse kind of snow. It pinches your calf and reminds you with every step who's in charge here. Ulf led, his shoulder bare, the oar in the wrong hand because he was used to it. Freydís wore nothing that clanged. Svala had her knife visible so no one would think she didn't have it. Haki and Ketil lugged rope and silence. Torfi wore his good mood like a coat he could sell if necessary.

The fjord was glass with cracks. We took the narrow boat, which creaked like an old man standing up. The sky hung low, the air had that stillness in which sounds learn to walk. We rowed, we panted, and somewhere in the white was a direction that didn't point to land. I knew when we reached Jötunheim: the cold was growing teeth. No longer the biting you know. More like a chewing that doesn't stop when you say you've had enough.

The first giant we saw didn't have a face. He was a stone, walking. A hump in the distance, always the same size, no matter how far you went. Then he turned, and the distance had eyes. "Don't run," said Ulf. "Don't stare," said Svala. "Don't breathe," whispered Torfi, taking double breaths.

The mountain raised an arm. A chunk detached itself from it, like a cough that gets worse when you laugh. The chunk flew as if the air were thicker than we were. It hit the snow in front of us, and the snow acted as if it were suddenly water. We were lying, we were standing, we were fools and alive. "Mead!" I shouted, and Torfi actually threw up the leather skin like a sacrifice that is bad but well-intentioned. The giant regarded the movement as one regards an insect. Then he let it go. Perhaps he liked brave little ones. Perhaps he liked mead. Perhaps he was bored, and we weren't quite right yet.

The ravine we had to enter smelled of iron and old breath. Smooth walls, bluish, as if someone had left a sea standing and forgotten to clear it away. Our boots made noises that didn't belong to us. I saw shadows in the depths that looked as if they had an opinion of their own. "Under the root," Freydís murmured, and I knew she meant Yggdrasil, even though nothing here looked like a tree. But the trembling in the ground wasn't weather. It was the earth.

Hrímnr's hall wasn't a hall at all. It was a belly in the ice. Pillars that didn't come from hands, light that didn't come from fire. In the center, a chair, rough, ribbed, as if the cold itself had squeezed it out of itself. On it, Hrímnr. Tall, yes. But not that. Old. Age as anger. Skin like frozen mist that chose not to disappear. In his mouth, I saw something flash white-blue every time he breathed. A tooth like a splinter of winter.

"Little fire," said Hrímnr. His voice was like snow clinging to you. "What do you want?"

"A chip from your oath," I said. "For someone who doesn't ask."

"Oaths are not for hands." His gaze passed me, to Svala, to Freydís, to Ulf, to Torfi. "They are for tongues."

"Then cut mine," I said, "but give me the shavings."

He didn't laugh. He didn't nod. He blinked, slowly, as if he were dusting off time himself. "A price." He tapped the chair with a finger, and it sounded as if Eis were telling the truth. "A breath."

"How many more does the world want today?" I murmured, and Freydís took a short breath. "Take him," I said. "But not so that I can't feel him anymore."

He stood up. It took a moment, during which we grew smaller. Then he bent down, opened his hand, and the cold came to me like a dog. It smelled me, it tasted me, it took a sip. My lungs were cold. Not outside. Inside. And yet I was still standing. When I breathed again, it hurt, and it was good.

"The chip," he said, and placed something hard and cold in my hand. Small. Sharp on one edge. He looked at me, and I knew this wasn't a deal between equals. This is just weather. You get what you get. You give what you have to give.

"When you carry him to the bridge," said Hrímnir, "do not step where the light is red."

"I won't jump," I said.

"You'll want it," he said, and that was worse.

We walked. The gorge closed behind us, as if we had left only a scar on our skin from the cold. The sky remained the same: a blanket too heavy. Then something changed that wasn't sky. A shimmer in the distance. No northern lights. No sun. A track. Three tracks, one above the other, fine as threads, strong as steel, and one of them **red** in a way that isn't color, but decision. "Bifröst," Svala said quietly, and the word warmed her mouth.

Heimdall stood where the shimmer meets the world. Not tall. Not smaller than necessary. The kind of man you don't notice when you're stupid—and don't forget when you become wise. His eyes weren't bright; they were alert. "Who steps to the bridge?" he asked, and it didn't sound like a question begging for an answer. It sounded like one seeking an answer. **is**.

I lifted Odin's rune knot without untying it. "Messenger," I said. "Not of my own free will. But not without it either."

Heimdall's gaze swept over us, lingering on my soles, as if he saw how much ground they had already offended. "The seal," he said. I handed it over. He touched the leather, nodded slightly, as if someone he disliked had been proven right. "The flame burns," he said without pathos, pointing to the **red ribbon** that ran along the bridge, a thin, shimmering thing that shamed the air for not being a blade. "It keeps the Frosty at bay. Until the last day."

"And then?" asked Torfi, because Torfi is the man for unnecessary questions.

"Then it will break," said Heimdall. "When Muspell's sons ride." He said it as if he had practiced it many times. As if he didn't want to have to practice.

"I have a piece of oath," I said, showing the **Span**.

"Give it here," he said, and his hand was warm like an oven that doesn't like you. "It doesn't bind. It reminds." He took the splinter, placed it near the red flame, and for a moment, the world smelled of wet wood over a fire. The flame twitched, didn't take the splinter, but it took **Truth**. Heimdall nodded. "Later, someone will think he stopped you. In reality, what you left here **different** let it happen."

"Can we write this down in mead?" whispered Torfi. Svala nudged him.

There was a creaking sound. Not in the bridge. In the world. From the distance, where the white lingers longer, something dark broke away. Large. Broad. With a sense of humor that lifts stones. "Miner," said Ulf. "He wants to know what we're doing here."

Heimdall didn't step forward. He didn't have to. He stood, and that was enough. "Anyone who wants to be evil," he said calmly, "can remain stupid today." The giant didn't stop because Heimdall had talked him into it. He stopped because the **red hem** made him hurt. It wasn't a fire that burns. It was one that **no** says. The giant understood **no**. He yelled back and turned so we could see his back. I like the backs of things I don't love.

"And us?" asked Freydís, without taking his eyes off her.

"You go," said Heimdall. "You have given."

"Odin?" I asked.

"He takes what's free," said Heimdall. "But he pays elsewhere."

"Ragnarök?" The word tasted of iron. It was stupid to say it. I said it anyway.

Heimdall looked at me, and for a breath there was nothing but **Time between us**. "When I blow, you'll know where you stood." He put his hand on my shoulder, briefly, which is nothing and everything. "Go."

We walked. Not fast. Not slowly. I felt **heat** in the soles, the red hem had inscribed in the ground. Not a blister, just a memory. Torfi turned around three times, Freydís not once, Svala once. Ulf counted steps, because some men pray like that.

The way back hurt less. That's the thing about paths of the gods: they hurt going there, but they hurt differently coming back. The air was warmer in the ravine, but my lungs weren't. I coughed, and it sounded like something living inside me wanted to settle the score. "Breathe," Freydís murmured. "Give him space. He'll be back."

"What's the point of all this?" asked Ketil, young enough to believe an answer would make him older.

"So that something happens later that's going to happen anyway," said Svala. "And so that some of those who die can crack a joke beforehand."

In the village, the snow acted as if it had never been gone. The torches were lit, the Yule tree breathed, the smoke smelled as it should again. The ravens perched on the ridge. One flew off. The other looked at me as if he'd left something in my stomach that he'd get later. Odin didn't come. He didn't need it.

I sat down on the bench, put the **sole** to the fire, and the heat of the bridge stretched my limbs in my flesh. Ulf pretended to be asleep. Svala polished a blade that never comes clean. Freydís stood at the door, looking out as if someone were outside who thought he couldn't be seen. Torfi rummaged for the mead, found it, found it empty, found life unfair, and I couldn't disagree with him.

"We were doing a favor," I said to the room.

"We took out a loan," said Freydís.

"We've gained time," murmured Ulf.

"We took a breather," said Svala.

"We're still breathing," I said. "That's enough for today."

At night I dreamed of **Bifröst**— three lanes, one of them red like a prohibition. I dreamed of a horn that needed no air to sound. I dreamed of a wolf with a mouth that devoured the sky and the ground at once. I dreamed that I laughed,

not because something was funny, but because I still had teeth. When I woke up, my mouth was dry, my feet warm, and in front of the door lay a short rope of red wool that no one had knotted, yet was there. I tied it to the Yule tree. No protection. A memory.

"When the horn calls, you know where you stood," Odin had said—or Heimdall, or both, or neither. I knew it. Between **Fire and case**. And I knew we would run again when someone said in a god's voice, "Come on, little man." Until then, I drank, laughed, argued, and kept a hand on the wood that holds us together when the world bends down to test us.

And if anyone asks if I'm happy to do the Allfather a favor: I do what I do so that the time I hate and love slips through my fingers once more before it belongs to someone with more hands than me. The ravens know that. They looked at me as I stepped out the door. I raised the cup, which was empty, and pretended it was full. Sometimes that's enough. Sometimes it isn't. Today, it was enough.

Chapter 17 - Race to Miklagard

We left the coast on the starboard side like an old scar and took the longer line, the kind only captains who don't like themselves like. Two days of wind, one day calm, then wind again, coming from their teeth. At night we saw the glowing eyes of the sea like cats under a wooden jetty. On the third morning, gulls sat on the yardarm, pretending to be crew. Ulf spat over his shoulder, counted marks on the mast, and muttered that the pressure was falling, so we would pay. I almost fell asleep when a sail appeared in the crack on the horizon, brown, fat, ragged like an excuse.

The ship came astern, limping, pushing water like a pig through mud, and at the bow stood a man whose beard was so red it looked like he'd hung it in a bucket of blood. His helmet had horns that would have made any cow laugh. "By all the gods," whispered Torfi, "that's—" "Don't say," I growled, because the wind carries things far. The redhead waved as if he were the master of the Black Sea. "Hey!" he roared over, his voice like a thunderbolt beating into butter. "Have you seen any mead that isn't hiding from me?" His crew was a jumble of morons and hearts, one nearly falling off the stern, another holding two chickens under his arm that looked as if they'd voted for the captain. The redhead laughed at me as if we were brothers who loved the same stupid decision. "Name?" he called. "Hallgrim," I shouted. "You?" "Hägar," he roared,

proud as a shield boss. "Terrible!" "I can see that," Svala called dryly. He pointed at our deck. "If you see that Greek up ahead, tell him I've tasted his wine and it tastes like tears." We passed each other like two bad ideas nodding at each other. His ship lurched into the wind, his laughter trailing half a mile behind us.

The storm came not as a wall, but as an idea—first a crow's shadow tilts, then the mast stands crooked in thought. We reefed, we tied, Ulf shouted commands that cursed more than spoke. The water rose, his nose dug, the keel sang. In a trough that was more like a grave, a nutshell appeared on the port side: a child's ship, a toy with a real boy on it. Little fellow, freckles above his nose, eyes like two pale nails, and a forehead that thought. "That's—" Torfi began. "Stop," I hissed, because the wind likes names. The boy held his hand to his forehead, measuring us, the wind, and the waves in one breath. Then he put two fingers to his mouth and whistled for us to perform a maneuver that no sane person would attempt. "He's crazy," said Ulf. "He's right," said Svala, and before our courage could protest, we tilted the boat like a knife in a loaf of bread, let the great wave lift us sideways, screeching our oars against it. The "Sea-Skinder" danced. One wrong foot, and we would have ended up like a duck on a hatchet. But she did. When we climbed out of the foam, the boy was standing on his boat, rubbing his nose and grinning as if he had just pulled us out of a knot. "What's your name?" yelled Torfi. "Wickie!" he yelled back, as if it were a magic spell, and then disappeared in a cloud of spray that looked as if the waves were applauding.

We arrived in Kherson with blue hands and red eyes, where traders sell wind like oxen when the news is good. The quay stank of seaweed, horse, and soup. Between sacks of salt and barrels of pitch stood a traveling troupe, colorful trousers, overly big words. One of them: short, with a mustache like two crooked sickles, a gaze like a knife in a jacket pocket. Beside him was a broad block, grinning as if he'd learned to think with his gut. "Boar on a spit!" shouted a lad, "Wine! Tales from Gaul!" The little one stepped forward, eyeing our oars like a pantry. "Strong arm, my friend," he said to Ulf in a language that was nevertheless understood. "We'll drink later, when you're no longer rowing." "Who are you?" asked Torfi, who can never leave anything lying around. The little one blinked as if he'd just shouldered a ton of cunning. "Asterix," he said curtly, and the tall man next to him laughed, as if the word were a memory of ten broken doors. "We're in a hurry," I said, and he nodded, knowing that haste costs more than calm. "Then take this," he said, and pressed a small phial into my hand, the cork looking as if it would bite me if I pulled it. "For necessity. Not for pride." "What's that?" I asked. "An excuse that only works once," he said,

pushing the cork tighter and disappearing back into the crowd. The fat man was pushing a boar like a cart through the alley, and somewhere a merchant shouted, just realizing what was wrong with him.

In the Black Sea, watercolors turned to steel. Nikandros cruised so closely that we could see the grin of his gold ring in the sun. He let his beautiful ship rub against our old one like a cat against a leg about to bite it. "You can still turn back!" he shouted in Greek that posed even in the wind. "I don't want you to cry in Miklagard." "We never cry," I cried. "We drink." "And pay," Svala added. He sent across a splash of water—noble wine if you ask him in the south, stale scorn if you taste it here. I pulled the phial from my pocket and weighed it. Not now. Pride devours help first.

At night, the Slavic dogs came, their sails so black they cut the moon. Their boats purred like knives, their calls short, as if they didn't want the night to know them. We stood shoulder to shoulder with those we despised by day. Metal spoke to wood, flesh wrote with blood. Svala made two men shorter than they wanted to be, Freydís made the decision for the third, and Ulf dropped one over the railing to where the sea takes everything. Nikandros fought finely, as if a sword were also a court official. A pirate jumped on my back; his teeth found fur, not skin; I rammed him against the mast until his breath forgot its direction. When it was over, the two of us, the Greek and I, stood there and heard the night breathe again. "Tomorrow we'll be enemies again," he said. "Today too," I said, and he nodded, polite as always, which I resented.

There were still two days to go until the Bosphorus, two nights in which the wind drew threads that tasted of stories. On the second evening, a spice merchant sat in the shade of a bale and called out berries to us that smelled of pepper and a promise. He had a scar above his lip that looked as if it could laugh without the man noticing. "Are you buying knowledge or goods?" he asked. "Both are in the wrong dose." I knew the voice in the wood of his words. "Loki," I said, and he winked as if I'd just watched him perform a card trick. "I'll sell you a shortcut," he whispered, "a current that Byzantine ships avoid because it's too honest." "How much will it cost?" "Just your pride if you end up saying you didn't need it." "Then sell it to Torfi," I murmured. He grinned as if Torfi were a gift. "Don't take the lighthouse on the right, take the one that's not shining," he whispered. "There's a stone rope under the water. If you go across it, you'll be thrown into the city's horns." "And if not?" "Then you'll come back later, like everyone else." He was gone before I could thank him, leaving behind the smell of cinnamon, lies, and very clear water.

The Bosphorus is a mouth that first praises you, then devours you. We took the dark line that only fools and gods take, and the "Sea Flayer" leaped as if its joints had been waiting for this jolt. Nikandros carried the safe line, polite, clean, punctual. We flew to the city's feet, not as guests, more like dogs who know the court. Walls rose, gates yawned, domes held the sun as if it weren't theirs. The Golden Horn was full of crackle, boats, curses, merchants speaking with hands that wore more rings than fingers should have. We rammed ourselves into a gap that immediately hurt us, leaped onto the city's wood, and the city leaped onto us.

When a place smells from all directions, you know it's trying to rob you. Miklagard smelled of fish, oil, horse, people, incense, sweat, pepper, and promises. The alleys were too narrow for excuses, the squares too large for modesty. I pulled my hood down, Freydís left it open. Svala kept her hand on her knife, Ulf kept his eyes fixed on the gates, which were far too large here. Torfi ran ahead like a dog who doesn't yet know the world doesn't like him.

The shield hung where the Greek had promised it: the gate of the Imperial Market, bronze in gold, pretending to be more than it was. Guards in scale armor, spears so clean you could shave in them. Merchants pushed baskets, rich women pushed glances, poor men pushed bad luck. "Plan?" hissed Svala. "In, shield, out," said Torfi, and that was his best. "Distraction," said Freydís, and kicked a fruit stand so hard it turned into an avalanche. Plums, apples, figs, an entire summer's produce crashed down at the feet of order. The guards roared downward instead of forward, and in that very breath, Torfi stood on a pillar, jumped, grabbed the shield, kissed it like a cousin, and ripped it off its hook. The thud the chain made was heard even by a god.

"Run!" I yelled, and for a long moment, everyone did. We ran, Torfi in front, his shield rattling at his back like a lie against a door. The alley pulled us in, merchants shouted, a monk tried to smother me with a blessing that smelled like a curse. A Byzantine officer rose from the ground, sword too shiny, face too convinced. Freydís left him where men lie who live with false conviction. Ulf lifted Torfi over a cart laden with squid bodies, their arms reaching for us like the helm. Svala kicked the soul out of a pursuer's knee. Haki stumbled, Ketil pulled him, I pulled the rest of the city behind me.

Nikandros stood at the harbor, and his smile was finally genuine because it hurt. "So you do need it after all," he shouted as we jumped over the plank. "We deserve it," I shouted back. "That's different." He cast off the line, his ship glided, ours jumped, guards shouted, arrows zipped. One lodged in the side of the ship, one lodged in Torfi's buttock, and I swear I heard the arrow laughing.

"Ouch!" he roared, "my honor!" "You never had that on your butt," said Svala, ripping out the shaft and tying something around it that might once have been a handkerchief. We pushed off, the city remained, the noise lasted longer, the arrows shorter.

Halfway up the horn, I pulled out the vial the Gaul had pressed toward me. I held it up to the light: a liquid so innocent it was dangerous. "Not for pride," he'd said. I smiled crookedly; I can do that. "For need," I murmured, bit the cork, pulled, and the smell that hit me was old as an oak forest and bold as a thief. I dabbed a drop on my tongue—just one. The world sharpened its edges. The wind gained legs. I saw the eddies in the water before they exhaled. "Ulf, right!" I yelled, "Svala, oars two and four against! Freydís, take the runner!" We slid through a gap that was only there because she liked us. The drop was gone before my pride knew it.

When we were out, Torfi laughed as if he'd insulted the sea. "We did it!" he roared. "We have the shield!" It lay at the bow, gleaming like a new sin, heavy in the hand and light in the head. I tapped it. The sound was hollow. "Bronze," I said. "Gold, if you don't know." Torfi looked at me as if I'd just stolen his childhood. "We'll still get the privilege," he grumbled. "Maybe," I said. "And maybe Odin will lay an egg."

The return trip wasn't a triumph, more like a cramp that wouldn't stop. You win and lose in the same minute—Odin had warned, and I hate it when gods are right. Nikandros kept his distance, respectful as a thief before a church. Two days later, we met up with the group again with the Gaul, in a grimy marketplace who immediately stole every story. "Did it help?" he asked, and his eyes weren't laughing. "It didn't hurt," I said, and he nodded, as if that were the highest possible form of thanks. The fat man next to him wore two boar hocks like gloves. "If you ever have to go south again," the little one said, "don't ask for directions. People lie here to protect you." "We lie at home to keep warm," I said, and he grinned, that short, sharp grin worn only by men with very clear nerves.

We encountered weather once again, reminding us that water isn't just wet. One night, I heard a voice on the aft deck that didn't want anything from us, yet we couldn't shake it. "You touched him," it said. "That's all the city wanted." "Who are you?" I asked into the darkness. "One who counts," the voice said, "and one who writes things down." Ratatoskr? No. More like an accounting of fate. I drank to her miscalculating.

When our fjord shrugged its shoulders to let us in, the Yule tree still stood on the shore like a man guarding the night. We pulled the "Sea Flayers" onto the planks, tied them, cursed, and laughed like survivors who don't yet know what for. The Jarl came later, smelled, weighed, and didn't ask too many questions. "Privilege?" he growled. "Perhaps," I said. "Gold?" "Bronze, which plays gold." "Profit?" "Time," I said, and it felt as if I were speaking into a bowl that would one day be called years.

The hall smelled of smoke, grease, and lies again. Torfi was already telling how the shield had run to him like a dog. Svala threw a bone at him, missed, then hit him later. Freydís sat at the post, looking at me as if she were about to put the truth in my mouth. "What have you lost?" she asked quietly. "A piece of nothingness," I said. "And what have you won?" "A story to warm us when the Raunächte come again." She nodded. "And enemies?" "At least one," I said, thinking of Nikandros, whose smile I felt on my back like an old scar.

Later, as the hall grew quieter, I sat outside, the snow burning my breath, and above the fjord the sky was clear as the blade of a knife that loves you. I thought of Hagar, sitting somewhere on a wave, laughing at the world for taking him seriously. I thought of the boy who showed us how to dance with a wave. I thought of the Gaul who pressed a stopgap measure into my hand that only works when you don't deserve it. I thought of Loki in the scent of spices, of Odin in the smoke, of Heimdall's red flame, which I could still feel in the soles of my feet like an old ember. I raised the cup that is never empty when you tell it a story and said softly, "To those who wink at us at the right moment. And to the wrong moments that keep us alive."

The wind did what it always does: It acted as if it belonged to me. I did what I always do: I acted as if I believed it. And tomorrow, when someone stands on the quay with a smile too smooth for our water, I'll say again: "Yes. Why not. One more bet. One more race. One more breath." Just so I can later claim I lost more than I own—and no one will believe me, except those who were there.

Chapter 18 - Frozen Fjord, Heated Heads

After midnight, when the village finally breathed more quietly and the wind over the rooftops only murmured like an old drunk, I grabbed my spear, rope, and a lantern that gave off more soot than light and ran alone to the ice. Not out of courage, but out of defiance. I wanted to hear what the night sounds like when no one else is talking to me. The trees stood like black nails in the sky,

and somewhere loose wooden boarding rattled as if winter were making music for itself. The ice in our thin spot had frozen over again, not thick, but defiantly. I hacked leisurely, breathing like someone without a witness, and was briefly pleased that no one beside me said "sustainability."

The hole gave way, gently, as if an eye were opening. Black water gurgled, a viscous, quiet sound, and the cold suddenly smelled metallic, not like snow, but more like wet stone that someone had sharpened. I crouched down, let the line sink with the bait, counting the knots until the lead touched something that felt like the bottom or a very fat fish. Nothing. Just the familiar waiting that crept into my skull and built nests there.

Then it happened. At first I thought: Northern Lights. A narrow, green shimmer at the edge of the world, licking the sky and then pulling it away again. But this was different. It was too close. It was too quiet. It had a sound. Not thunder, not whistling. A humming, as if someone had stretched a string of air and plucked it with a bone. The small hairs on the back of my neck stood up like a badly behaved hedgehog.

The light didn't come from above, as if it were a gift, but from nowhere, and then it was there, without the grace to grow. A pale oval, neither large nor small, fitting into the view but not into the language. It hung over the fjord, perhaps as high as two fir trees stacked one above the other. No flames, no sparks, just a cold glow that made the snowy surface around me milky. My lantern immediately became ridiculous: a sleepy beetle compared to an alien moon.

"Odin?" I said quietly, even though I knew his taste was of smoke, not pure light. The oval moved without pushing. No draft, no shadows, just movement that didn't bother to leave a mark. Beneath me, the ice vibrated, ever so slightly, like skin when fear touches it with fingertips. The humming grew deeper, creeping into my teeth, as if they wanted to have a say.

I stood up, slowly, like someone who doesn't want to flee from a faster animal. The light tilted. Not sideways, but inward. Three points formed at the edge, glowing brighter for a moment, so clearly that I suddenly saw the cracks in the ice right into their minds. Triangular. Then round again. Then just light. I placed my hand on the spear shaft, not because I thought I could save something with it, but so that I had something in my hand that was of this world.

Above the hole in the ice, the surface began to boil. Not a bubbling. A bubbling that was ashamed to be heard. A thin vapor rose, smelling of iron rain and

something that reminded me of the forge when Bjarni gets too hot: sweet, bad ozone, as if the sky had swallowed a handful of embers. Tiny sparks danced in the water, blue, as if stars had drowned in it and now briefly been released into the air. My line vibrated. Then it went slack, as if a giant had cut it with two fingers. I pulled – the hook was gone. Not broken. Gone. Clean. As if something had eaten it that had no teeth, but an opinion.

"Come on," I muttered into my beard. "Show me if you bite or just stare." I'm not smart when I'm alone.

The light dimmed a touch. Not much. Enough to make the fur on my sleeve prickles as if it were standing in the summer wind. In the corner of my eye, I saw the snow next to me change: The surface developed a skin, a glassy layer, into which lines ran, as if someone were drawing runic scratches with a very fine knife. Circle. Triangle. Line. Another circle. I blinked—gone. My breath hung between me and the light like a flag that didn't know where to go.

Something twitched in the hole. Not a fish. A shadow, black on black, too smooth for the water. It shot up, stayed below the surface, as if stuck from below to an invisible pane. I knelt because people kneel when they don't know whether to pray or curse. The shadow moved, following the shape of the oval above—as if one accompanied the other. Then it broke away. Something small floated up, very slowly, as if the water were honey. A grain? A pebble? A drop that doesn't drip? It touched the edge, stayed there, and the ice accepted it without cracking.

I stared at it. It was... inconspicuous. A sphere, darker than night, yet it reflected the milky light above it, as if there were more room inside it than in our entire fjord. I extended my finger, held it a hand's breadth in front of it. Cold, my mind said. Hot, my gut said. I didn't take my finger. I took the spear, twisted it, slid the iron blade underneath, and carefully tipped the thing onto the shaft. It stayed put. No pain, no hiss. Just a weight heavier than its size should allow.

Above me, the light flickered. Once. Twice. Then the humming grew higher, thinner, as if someone had pulled a string tighter. The oval lifted, not like a bird, more like a thought deciding to return later. It didn't rise, didn't sink, didn't break any air. Up above, there was a moment when the stars seemed briefly as if they had forgotten their place. Then there was nothing. No trace. No warmer air. No smell. Just me, a hole, and something on my spear that said no to words.

I was still standing when my knees decided to give way. I breathed and heard my breath, as if it wanted to fill the space between things. Behind me, the forest cracked, as if it had slept through the whole spectacle and now wanted to pretend everything was normal. I gently pushed the pellet into my fist. It was cold. Not ice-cold. World-cold. Cold without wetness, without biting, just without consent. The skin on my palm tingled, as if it wanted to remember what thing it had just shaken hands with.

On the way back, the ice crunched in a different language. I walked slowly, not because I was afraid of breaking through, but because I realized the night was listening to me. When I reached the village, the smoke hung rarely honestly over the rooftops, and somewhere, someone undeserving of the world was snoring. I entered the hall, where the fire was now nothing but embers. Freydís raised her head from the shadows, as if she had heard my footsteps before my body.

"You smell like... nothing," she said, her nose slightly wrinkled. "Not fish, not smoke."

"Outside," I said, holding my fist over the embers. "Open your hand," she said calmly. I did. She leaned forward. A tiny, black circle reflected in her pupils, so still that even the embers forgot to crackle. "What is that?" "A maybe," I murmured. "An if. A whatever-it-is-without-a-name."

Torfi crawled out of the straw, his hair like burst hay. "Will it do anything to drink?" "If we throw it in the barrel, the barrel will eat it," said Svala, who was standing in the doorway, even though she had just been asleep. She looked at me, not sternly, more sharply. "Where from?" I told him as best I could without insulting too many words. When I was finished, the four of us stood there as if watching an egg fail to hatch.

"Loki," Torfi finally said, "one hundred percent Loki." - "No," said Freydís. "He reeks of trickery. This reeks of... distance." - "An elven ship?" Ulf interjected, who had obviously been awake for some time and was just waiting for someone to find reality drunk. "The dwarves build forges in mountains. Why shouldn't the elves hang ships in the sky?" - "Because they have taste," murmured Svala. "And that one had none."

I weighed the thing in my hand once more, felt my skin softly tighten, as if to say: Enough. I went to the forge, pulled the latch, and let the darkness in. In Bjarni's toolbox lay things we cannot comprehend—the splinter of Yggdrasil's root, a piece of bone that refuses to grow old, and a ring that hums softly in the

night when no one is looking. I placed the sphere next to it, not in the middle, more toward the edge, so it wouldn't eat the others if it was very hungry. It made no noise. It did nothing. And that was precisely what bothered me the most.

In the morning, the courtyard was full of footprints that weren't even there. Not deeper, not lighter—just there. A circle in the snow, softly ironed, that felt as if the world had been briefly remade in that spot and then forgotten to crumple it again. We stood on it, we stood beside it; nothing happened. The Jarl came, scratched his beard, and said the best sentence of his life: "We won't distribute this."

Naturally, rumors exploded in the longhouse. One person said I'd caught the Northern Lights and boiled them. Another claimed I'd fished with spirits and bitten them. My vegan brother-in-law—he showed up at just the right time, of course—wanted to know if one could perhaps "feed on light," which would eliminate the need to kill animals. I told him he should try it, and if he made it to spring, he'd get my share of the fish. He nodded seriously, which worried me.

At night, when the wind began to sing again and the ice played its delicate notes, I lay on the bench, staring into the beams, and heard something that wasn't a sound: a faint, very faint remembering that didn't come from my head. Not a word, not an image. More like a pushing. Like a finger tapping a map, somewhere far in the north, where there are no names. I stood up, went to the smithy, and put my hand to the box. Nothing. And yet something. Not threatening. Not friendly. Just: there.

"You always bring us the wrong gifts," Freydís said behind me, the embers in her voice warming me even more than the fire. "What's the point this time?" "Maybe nothing," I said. "Maybe later. Maybe never. Maybe... when the horn blows."

"Then we'll stick it where all the maybes lie," she said, briefly placing her hand on the back of my neck—cold, real, our world. "And tomorrow we'll bring fish again. From things that are clearly alive until we eat them."

"Sustainable," I grumbled.

She grinned. "Sustainable."

Outside, the fjord crackled as if negotiating with the sky. The circle in the snow remained. The thing in the box remained silent. And I pulled the blanket higher, drank the last of the thin mead from a mug that saw more stories than it did, and thought: If winter is going to be crazy, at least it's going to be done with style. And if something comes from above and doesn't introduce itself, it can take a back seat—behind hunger, wolves, strife, love, and a village that still laughs even in the frost.

Chapter 19 - Hel's Invitation

The fjord lay like a long, narrow coffin lid beneath the sky, and the sky was so low it seemed as if it had decided to suffocate us all. I stood at the edge of the ice and thought it was the quietest place in the world, until I realized the silence was only so great because it was hiding something. When the wind came up, it wasn't a real wind, just that thin tug the night gives you to check you're still warm. I was warm enough to curse, too sober to run away, and too stubborn to go home. So I stayed.

It didn't come like thunder. It didn't make a grand gesture, no display of sparks and bells. At first, there was only the fog, thick and damp like old fur. Then I heard my name, as if someone had carved it into the ice beneath me and the letters were now speaking. "Hallgrim." No question, no greeting, just the acknowledgment that I was standing here, and she had always known that.

I didn't turn around. I knew it was the same behind as it was in front: fog, darkness, the harsh breath of cold. The second time, the voice was closer. "Hallgrim Ragnarson." This time it had a crack in the middle, a small crumble that sounded like laughter, which never needs to be loud. When I turned around, there was no one there. When I looked ahead again, there was someone.

Half of her could have been mistaken for a queen. Black hair, skin like moon milk, one eye that was still and saw all. The other half was a textbook example of decay: skin gray, so thin in places that bones lost the courtesy of hiding. The dead eye in the socket lay like a pale pebble in a stream bed. It did not stare. It was simply there, as winter is there: not to be persuaded, not to be driven away. "I invite you," she said, and the air around her mouth grew colder instead of warming. I did not need a name. Some things bear them in the way your belly clenches. Hel. Daughter of mischief and mistress of all that does not die with glory.

"Where to?" I asked, even though it was obvious.

"To where words end and memories begin to make sense." She smiled. The living side warm, the dead side incapable of it, and precisely because of that, honest. "Just for a moment. For you. For me, time is an insult."

"And what do you want in return?" It never even occurred to me that gods don't want anything. Anyone who doesn't want anything won't last long here.

"You will give of yourself what is not yours," she said. "A breath. A shadow. A memory too big for your head." She bent her head, and her hair slipped like night over night. "Come."

I didn't walk. I fell. Not down. Away. The ice softened beneath my feet; I didn't sink in, I sank out. The fog turned gray, then lighter, then dark again, and suddenly something that wasn't ground, yet yielded like wood, carried me. In front of me, a bridge spanned a river that looked as if it were cast from steel and had stopped flowing.

"Gjallarbrú," said the guardian, standing there as if she were a railing with eyes. Pale, yellow, her arms thin but strong. Modgudr. "The living rarely walk here."

"I'm bad at speaking," I said, and my voice sounded like it didn't want to make the detour.

"Hel is waiting for you." It didn't sound like an invitation. More like, "That's been decided long ago."

I set foot on the bridge. Every step made a sound, as if a hammer were striking an empty hall somewhere far away. When I reached the middle, something lifted its snout at the end of the arch. Fur black as molten night, teeth bright as iron that had seen smoke. Garmr. We looked at each other, and it was as if I saw my own hunger. He stepped aside, not because he liked me, but because the command was older than his will.

Beyond the bridge lay no palace, no village, no string of houses. It was Helheim, and Helheim is less a place than a decision. The snow fell without falling. The air stagnated without settling. Shadows had outlines, but no owners. And right in the middle she stood, barefoot on the frost that didn't melt beneath her feet. "Welcome," said Hel, and the word didn't take a breath.

"Pretty," I murmured, "in your own way." I like places that don't pretend to be alive when they aren't.

"You want to know what will become of you," she said, as if I had asked. "You want to know if all this isn't just noise to cover up the falling."

"I want to know if I'm making the right mistakes," I said. "We'll save the really wrong ones for when we're older."

She smiled again—one half soft, the other half true. "There are only mistakes," she said. "Some wear crowns, some wear footprints in the snow. Come."

We walked without moving. That's how it felt. Hel pointed with a hand that hung on the border between beautiful and bone, at things I only saw on second glance. There lay one who had died with a cup in his hand and now could not close his fingers around it. There stood one whose back bore the notch of an axe blade, so clean that the pain that had killed her looked like a signature. A child lay there, breathing without taking a breath; its mouth was half open in a word that no one heard. No one spoke. The dead are not mute; they just no longer need anything.

"Why am I here?" I asked, more quietly than I intended.

"Because you think you know what the end is." Hel stopped, her gaze running up my spine like a ladder of ice. "Because you thought life was about kicking doors and laughing afterward. It is that. But it's also about waiting while the door doesn't open." She gestured past me with the bony half of her face. "See?"

I saw Ulf, not the living Ulf, but the possibility of Ulf, if he were to stumble, where the snow hides the knife. I saw Svala, not the one the world reckons with, but the other, the one who will one day stay awake one night too long because no one was looking out for her. I saw Freydís, laughing on the edge of something that wouldn't let her laugh. I saw myself, and I didn't like myself.

"Stop it," I said. I had enough news.

"You wanted answers." Hel stepped closer, and the contrast between their two halves was worse up close, because beauty didn't cover the decay, but was its neighbor. "I have only one: You'll be back." She raised a hand, and for a moment I thought she was going to stroke my cheek. Instead, she shoved two fingers against my chest, where the heart has learned to be harder than the ribs. Coldness penetrated, so subtle that at first it seemed warm. "Not today. But you'll be back."

"Then give me something worth the wait," I said. "I'm not the man for the empty in-between."

"You want a pledge?" Hel laughed, and somewhere far away, ice cracked. "Good. Give me a memory you love. I'll give you one you need."

"Which one do you want?" I knew that was stupid. Gods don't say what they'll take.

"Your father's face, before he hurt you." She said it as gently as if offering a piece of bread. "You carry it around like it's a shield. It's a stone."

I exhaled, and it was as if I were pulling a knife from my chest and handing it to a child. "Take it," I said. "I carry other things."

She didn't take the memory, she took the weight. My head felt lighter, but no better. "And now," said Hel, "you take it." She pressed something into my hand, and it was cold without being wet, smooth without being soft. A splinter, deeper than its size. "Éljúðnir," she said casually, as if it were an address rather than the name of her hall. "The edge of it. Not for cutting. For remembering."

"For what reason?"

"So you know when you're lying when you say you're no longer afraid." The dead eye in the side of her skull glowed as if a distant light with no source were shining into it. "Go now. Garm has patience. I don't."

"I..." I took a breath, realized it was a ridiculous gesture, and nodded instead. "I'll drink again."

"That's good," said Hel. "The living should drink. The dead are the ones who stop."

I turned, and there was no way back. One step, another, and the river Gjöll stood there again, as if it had never seen me. Modgudr inclined his head, not friendly, not hostile, just correct. Garmr raised his nose, as if smelling something that doesn't exist in this world, and decided that it won't kill anyone today. The bridge sounded again like a hammer in the distance. Then there was fog, then ice, then the fjord. I stood on our world, and it acted offended, as if I had gone astray.

The first person to see me wasn't human. The old farm cat sat on the path as if on guard, and didn't hiss. She looked at me, turned her head to the side as if

checking if I was a mirror, and then walked away without saying goodbye. That's a compliment here.

No one really slept in the longhouse, they only pretended. I entered, didn't put the splinter on the fire, didn't put it in the cup, didn't put it on the wall. I put it on my tongue, just for a heartbeat. Taste of iron left too long in the moonlight, and of snow on old wood. Then I took it out again and tucked it into my belt, where men carry things they mustn't lose. Torfi raised his head from the straw, saw me, and blinked as if he'd just tried to straighten his eyes. "You smell like a cellar," he murmured.

"After cold," said Svala from the post, without looking at me. "And after... the end." She stood up, walked past me, and stopped halfway. "Did you bring anything?"

"One less memory," I said. "But a new problem."

"Then off to the smithy." Freydís was already waiting at the door, her fur loose, her neck bare, as if she wanted the night to know who she was talking to. We went into Bjarni's workshop, which smelled of iron and, after the stories, of tools. I placed the splinter in a hollow in the wood that had once been intended for nails, and the air above the thing became a finger's breadth lower. Not darker. Lower. As if it were sinking and waiting. Bjarni came over, rubbing his hands, which had long since looked like the metal he spoke with. "Pretty," he said. "Ugly," I said. "Really," he said, nodding contentedly.

"Hel?" the Jarl asked later, when I sat down and pretended I was just tired. I said nothing. Sometimes silence must be the answer; otherwise no one will believe you. He nodded, as if I had answered, and looked into the embers as if he could see in them what I had seen. "Is she worried?" he asked quietly, and I laughed—once, harshly.

"She has what she needs," I said. "Worry is for us."

In the days that followed, the village seemed as if there were a cold nail in the beam that hadn't been there before. The children ran around the smithy in a detour that wasn't explained to them. The dogs lay closer to the fire than usual. Torfi stopped playing with his knife for a few nights because the clanging made a sound he didn't like. Svala once had such a hard dream that she woke up with the knife in her hand; she put it down next to her and went back to sleep. And I... I forgot my father's face, as it had been before he turned evil. It wasn't gone. It was just no longer my innocence. I could have cried. I didn't. I drank.

Hel never came back. Gods are never there when you call them, only when they call you. Once, at night, I heard Garmr howling in a dream, and the sound scraped against my ribs like a cold spoon. Another time, I stood by the fjord, saw the cracks in the ice like runes, and thought they were writing something I should read. I didn't read it. I've gotten into the habit of leaving some doors closed.

And yet I carried her invitation with me like a second knife. You don't touch it every day. But you know it's there. When you raise your hand in an argument, you feel its weight. When you laugh, you see in the corner of your eye the spot on your belt where it's resting. And when you're alone and the wind pretends it might like you, you hear, ever so faintly, someone saying your name, as if they'd carved it there where no one can scratch it away.

"Will you go again?" Freydís asked as the two of us stood outside, pretending that stars were more than holes in the sky.

"I'll go when she calls," I said. "And if she doesn't call, I'll go later."

"Later is a bad word for those who drink," she said, nudging me with her shoulder. "Later means 'without you.'"

"Then sooner," I said. "Or never. Whatever happens."

At the edge of the village hung a bone bell that we never rang because it would attract the wrong person. That night, it didn't ring. But I heard its silence. And I knew that somewhere beneath the roots of the world, a queen stood, barefoot on her own frost, and she hadn't forgotten me. Not a threat. Not a consolation. Just an invitation that never expires.

I went home, laid the splinter down so I could see it again in the morning, and drank long enough until the cold in my stomach said it wanted to stay. When I closed my eyes, there was no bridge, no dog, no two-faced woman. There was only our damned fjord, which looked as if it had developed a cough after laughing. I didn't ask anyone for permission, I didn't ask anyone for forgiveness. I just told myself: If she calls you, you go. And if no one calls, drink. And tomorrow, when the wind again acts as if it has news, you go to the ice and listen to it, because some news doesn't come with words, but with a cloud of breath that isn't yours.

So I remained between two worlds, like everyone still breathing: one hand on the axe, one hand on the cold. And somewhere deep beneath us, where all lies

cease, someone smiled with one half and showed with the other how everything ends—not with it being over, but with it finally being no longer necessary to pretend to be immortal.

Chapter 20 - The Battle for the Island of Gold

We held our course until the Sand King was just a hot spot on the horizon, and the island looked as if it were ashamed to have consumed so much light. The gold lay like a second belly in the boat, heavy and impudent. Each of us pretended not to see it, but we all heard its weight when the bow fell into the wave: a dull, rich thump that said greed has a voice of its own.

On the second evening, the wind suddenly smelled different. Not of salt and sun, but of bad luck and deliberateness. A plume of spray, too clean for nature. Ulf blinked against the remaining light, his thumb on the rudder like a claw. "Aft," he murmured. "Two. No, three sails." Torfi climbed onto the thwart, covering his eyes with his hand. "Friends?"

"Friends are calling," said Svala. "Those are counting."

The sails came closer, black in the twilight, low and wide like knives cut across the water. Painted eyes were emblazoned on the bows, so silly they were dangerous. Arrows in the barrels, grappling hooks on the bulwarks, and men smiling as if they'd already slit our throats in our heads. Slavs? Mixed race? Who cares. Pirates are a separate race.

"Put out the oars," I said. "Sail down. We're dancing close."

"Around three?" asked Ketil.

"Around three," I said. "One, two: we'll rip out their teeth. Three: we'll bite back."

Svala handed out shields as if they were last words. Freydís tied a rope around her waist, the other end around the jib boom: if she falls, she won't fall far. Torfi tested the clay jars of pitch: small, ugly moons that you throw in the wrong direction. Ulf held his course as if he had promised the sea years ago never to flicker again.

The first hail of arrows came as hail of arrows always comes: cowardly and punctually. Half a dozen splashed into the planks, one stuck in Ulf's coat, one buzzed past my ear and took a hair I didn't love anyway. "Shield up!" Svala roared, and the sound of her voice cleared the air.

"The middle one wants to go," Ulf said calmly. "The others are pressing us."

"Then we'll give the middle one reasons to insult his mother," I said. "Torfi!"

"Here!"

"A sense of proportion, not heroics. If I shout 'now,' Unlucky Moon."

"I've been waiting for 'now' since I could walk."

They came from starboard, then from port again, circling us as if testing whether we were already dizzy. The one in the middle lay across, oars up, hook ready. I saw the whites of a man's eyes grinning too soon. "Now!" I yelled.

Torfi threw. The jug flew cleanly, its opening forward as if he had bribed the wind, and shattered at the bow. Pitch splashed over men, wood, and linen. "Not yet," I hissed as he reached for the flint. "Not yet."

The first grappling hook came, digging into our side. Svala slashed the claw away as if it were a bad tooth that had been bothering her for a long time. Freydís jumped, ripped the shaft of a spear from a man's hand, and returned the blunt part—across his nose. Ulf dropped lightly, only a hand's breadth, just enough for the second hook to snap into the void.

"Now!" I yelled again, but this time it wasn't Torfi. Haki was already standing with the oil pan, a wick smoldering, and the pitch on the other ship's bow went "woof," as if it had only been waiting for the right name. The enemy's forward third was ablaze, and the laughter on deck turned into animal noises. Burning men jump badly; burning boats jump worse. Chaos has a favorite color, and it's fiery.

"Heel hard to port!" Ulf shouted, and the Seaflayer circled so hard she felt as if she were about to rise out of the water. The second pirate was now wrong, his bowsprit almost kissing our stern. "Hook!" one of them yelled. "None!" I shouted, threw my shield to the rail, and grabbed the spear that came over with both hands. Pull, don't push. A man at the other end realized too late that he'd held on—I pulled, the wave helped, he fell, and his face made a sound that

wood and salt love. Freydís planted her foot in his chest and made sure he learned what water tastes like in despair.

"Someone's coming from the right!" shouted Ketil. The third boat had realized that we weren't waiting for it to show off its beauty. It came at an angle, trying to cut us off, break our rudder, then pluck us up like a crab. "Ulf?" I said. "I've got it," said Ulf. It sounds easy when he says it. He let us drift for a heartbeat, then gave us a hard steer, the stern pinched, the bow jumped, and we glided away from the stranger by a whisker, so close that I could see the scar above his helmsman—and the surprise underneath that we were still there.

"Target it again," I said, "but spread it, Torfi. Make the ground slippery for them, no fire—not yet." Torfi threw two jugs, which shattered like badly behaved fruit. Men slipped, fell, cursed. The smell of pitch is like an announcement no one wants to read.

The first pirate was now burning beautifully, but things that burn beautifully are also dangerous. His mast fell—a crooked angel—and crashed into the second boat, which was just sorting out its honor. Wood broke, men screamed, two Romans disappeared under a sail that was ablaze. "Free the rudder!" I shouted. "Don't stare, work!"

Then it hit us. An arrow, deep, sideways, where boards lay close to our gold bars. Not a hole, but a splinter. Water splashed, a fine stream that looked as if the sea were suddenly thirsty for us. "Stop it!" Freydís cried, throwing herself against the spot with a piece of felt, pressing as if she were trying to staunch the boat's bleeding. Ulf stayed on course, as if there was nothing to repair except his patience.

The third boat came again. It had learned that we were mean, and now it wanted to be meaner. It lined up lengthwise, hooks out, ropes like spider webs. "Don't fight," I said. "Pull in." We left two hooks in, deliberately heeling a bit. The enemy cheered too early, pulled, we came closer, and the moment we were within kissing distance, Haki pushed forward the battering beam we've been driving around with for years as if it were a joke. No joke today. The iron beak kissed her belly—a short, passionate kiss—wood groaned, then something cracked that will never heal. Water took on board, men said goodbye to firm curses and tried new ones. We pushed back, released two hooks that no longer held us, and the third pirate lay heavily, tipping, struggling, tipping on.

"Now burn," I said, and Torfi was already up above, sparkling eyes, sparks in her hand. Two little fire children flew, found pitch, found thoughts, and then the sea was suddenly full of warm ideas. The light reflected off our gold pieces and turned the boat into an altar for a moment, which I didn't like.

"Who's missing?" Svala yelled, counting heads like debts. "Ketil!"

He was on the edge, half over the side, his arm caught in someone else's rope. Haki jumped, grabbed him, and for an ugly moment, the three of them were nothing but hands and water. I pulled on the rope, Freydís slashed, the rope gave way, and Ketil fell into the middle of us like a wet sack. He spat. "I hate today," he said, and that was the wisest statement of the evening.

The middle one, which was burning, was now just a torch with a sound. The second, struck by the mast, drifted like a bad thought that one can't shake. The third lost his right hand, then his courage. He turned away, badly, much too late, and showed us the backs of his men. I could have taught them a lesson. I did it, but differently: "Not behind," I said. "We are rich and we bleed. The sea is counting."

Ulf nodded. You nod when someone says the right thing and you later begrudge them the wrong thing. We only kept up enough speed to keep our wounds from reopening. Freydís and Svala darned, tied, and cursed with surgical precision. Torfi sat with an arrow in his upper arm, which he hadn't noticed until a moment ago, and turned pale when Svala spotted it. "I wanted to save it," he murmured. "For later." - "Later is a bad place to keep it," she said, tearing, pulling, and binding. His curse was nice, but not new.

As the night finally turned blacker than our sense of humor, three fire points hung diagonally in the water aft, pretending to be drowning stars. The wind became cool, as honest as a knife. The boat breathed, the planks creaked contentedly, like men who have a roof over their heads, even if it's only made of sky.

I sat at the bow, my feet against the pile of gold I would have gladly thrown overboard, the noise of it making, and held my hand against the wood that still held us up. "Odin," I said quietly, without pathos, "if you've been listening today, remember this: We haven't stolen anything that didn't want to steal us." No answer, of course. Instead, a quiet, steady thump under the keel—a wave that liked us.

"You could have hunted them," said Ulf, who was suddenly sitting next to me, so silently that even my greed hadn't heard him.

"I could have done a lot," I said. "I want to go home."

"And that one?" He tapped his chin against the gold edge.

"They'll come along. Until they support themselves."

Freydís came, sat down, laid her head briefly against the beam, and closed her eyes, not out of weakness, but out of permission. Svala sat next to Torfi, who acted grandly but breathed small. Ketil slept with his mouth open, as if he wanted to give the wind a second chance to fill it. Haki whispered a prayer that sounded not as if it were intended for the gods, but for the hands that would row again tomorrow.

Above us, the sky slowly pushed its cold forehead past us, and somewhere in the south, a very small, very cheeky shooting star rose, as if Loki had drawn a pin through the night, just to show that he hadn't forgotten where we were. I raised the cup, in which only the smell of mead remained, and said: "To the island of gold. May it lie there long and attract the fools." Ulf clinked his oar handle. "And to the fools," he said. "Without them, we would have peace. And what kind of life would that be."

The morning smelled like the journey home. Not certain, but conceivable. The burned hulls behind us became coal in my memory. Ahead of us lay a ribbon of water wide enough to swallow our mistakes and spit out only the stories. I smiled. Not because I was happy. Because I still had teeth.

And as the sun rose over our railing, acting as if it were a friend again, I saw in the distance what looked like smoke—not from fires, but from land. Our land. I stood up, ran my hand over the gold that would betray us as soon as someone looked closely enough, and said to the crew without turning around: "Men. Women. We're still alive. This is victory."

"This is the beginning of the next trouble," Freydís corrected.

"That's exactly why we drink," I said.

The sea responded with a soft, contented thump beneath the keel. And for once—just this one damned time—even the pile of gold sounded like a promise, not a judgment.

Chapter 21 - The Lost Brother

The wind ate into the boat's joints, and every blow against the side sounded like a promise the sea refused to keep. We were three days north of the last cabin where people still trade stories for mead, and the world had returned to that color that freezes every thought before it becomes a sentence. I had learned that cold doesn't just creep into your fingers, but into memories; it preserves them so well that you can taste them again, whether you want to or not. Eirik, I thought. The lost brother who perhaps had never been lost—only me.

We reached the village near the Bear Islands at the hour that hangs between two breaths. The smoke from the longhouses rose straight upwards, as if the sky had let a hole through. Ulf led us up the slope until, from a hilltop, we could see the square. Men in a shield wall, calm, disciplined, their feet nailed to the ground. And in the middle of it all, a figure that kicked me in the stomach: broader than before, harder, the beard a dark winter, but the line of his shoulders, the rugged gaze, the scar like an axe blade on his right arm – Eirik. He turned, and our eyes met, hard as two stones in a streambed. There's something ancient sitting at my back, screaming "Run!" or "Run him down!" I stopped. He did too. His face remained a helmet.

We entered the hall as traders. I didn't feel like wearing masks, but the world is easier to bear when you put one in front of it. The mead was warm, the air too heavy for faces. Eirik sat diagonally across from me, as if one of us had commanded it. "You've traveled far," he said. Not like someone asking if he should listen. Like someone who's heard it all. "Trade," I said. "Furs, fish, canvas. Perhaps men for a voyage." He pulled back the corner of his mouth almost imperceptibly. "We have enough to do here." Torfi was about to let loose with a quip, Svala stepped on his foot, and I drank as if that would clear the lump in my throat.

That night, I dreamed of the beach where we boys had run barefoot over the seaweed, more brave than wise. Father stood with the axe in his hand and watched us argue over who would throw it first. "One axe for two sons," he said. "Learn to share—or learn to cry." I threw too high; Eirik laughed and hit the piece of driftwood that lay further out. Later that day, as the smoke hung like an evil tongue over the fjord, all we found was his knife. I wanted to set the sea on fire. I wanted it to know pain.

On the third evening in the village, a noise shattered my sleep, as if logs were rubbing against each other. Not wind. Not wood. Something deliberate. I was out before I remembered that you think first, then walk. Shadows detached themselves from the edge of the forest—tall, rough, with shoulders like roof beams. Giants. No growling, no fanfare. They came like men going to work, only their work shattered. Torches flew, stakes cracked, snow sprayed. I had the axe in my hand and the world at my back. Beside me was Eirik, shield forward, blade low. No greeting, no introduction. We fell into the same cadence as before, the one the bodies had memorized, as if nothing had interposed but a very long, very bad night.

The first giant was foolish enough to underestimate us. I went low and sideways, Eirik high and straight. My axe took a piece of his thigh, he buckled, Eirik shoved his spear into his eye, and the world made that short, solemn noise when something big realizes it's no longer big. A second one grabbed me by the collar and lifted me up as if I were a wet torch. I kicked, aimed for what's sensitive even in giants, and landed back where men live. Eirik was already there, his left hand on my shoulder strap, his right on the blade that was sacred to him.

Between attacks, I heard children screaming, a man praying, someone laughing too loudly. I yelled, "Form up!" even though I had no command here; but the cry had teeth, and teeth grit. Shields closed, spear blades flickered, snow turned to mud. The last of the first wave ran—and fell, because Svala stepped on his Achilles tendon as if it were snakeskin in the grass. I nodded to her. She didn't nod. She fights, she doesn't comment.

We helped put out fires that didn't consume our house. As the smoke thinned and the men counted themselves, I leaned against a post, breathing heavily. Eirik stepped beside me. Proximity that doesn't determine whether it's good. "You move like him," he said calmly. "Like who?" - "Like my brother. He's dead." - "And I'm his ghost." - "Ghosts don't smell of pitch and mead." He said it without a smile, so I laughed for two.

In the morning, he stood with the Jarl's son at the edge of the longhouse, speaking curtly and coldly. Men carried the dead out, women remained silent, children stared like animals who'd learned that wolves lurk inside humans too. I approached him. "Come with me," I said. "Blood is blood. The sea has taken you, but we've betrayed it often enough." He shook his head, as if my voice were a wind being let out. "I owe their gods a debt." - "Which ones?" - "The ones that count," he said, and I liked the answer because I didn't like it.

On the second night, the frost came so deep that the wood creaked like old bones. I didn't sleep. Sleep had settled elsewhere. I went out, to the edge of the village, where the trees were lower. The snow crunched very brightly. Then the world flickered, as if someone had ripped the skin from something breathing beneath it. A trunk became a silhouette that looked like a man who had known too many winters. One eye glowed, the other a hole full of intent. "Odin," I said, as if it were an insult. He stepped closer, as if walking into a room he had forgotten he owned. "Sometimes," he said, "betrayal saves the truth." "Say it more simply," I growled. "If you love him, don't force him," he said, not looking nice when he was acting nice. "If you force him, you'll lose him twice." "And if I let him go?" – "Then he'll lose you one day—and maybe find you when his path has hurt him." His breath smelled of the smoke of old fires and of stories no one believes anymore because they're true. "Or would you rather he died by your side because you wanted to be right?" I said nothing. I had already said too much before I knew him. When I raised my head, there was only snow. Gods always leave before you return their questions.

The next day, someone was hammering in the smithy, but the sound was different—as if the blows were too short, too deep, too... right. I went over. The village blacksmith—a thin man with hands like pliers—stood beside it, looking as if he were an apprentice for the first time in his life. Before the anvil stood two figures, both barely as tall as my sternum, beards like roots, eyes like freshly ground lumps of coal. Dwarves. Not stories told by children to keep their mouths shut. Real ones, with movements like knives that make no sound.

The taller one raised his head. "You stink of questions," he said. "I won't cook you any answers." I grinned because I can't help it. "You cook mead. You forge answers." - "We forge rest for things that won't rest. And chains for things that won't be bound." He pointed at Eirik's arm. I had seen the golden bracelet, but I had thought it was just jewelry. Now I saw the runes, which turned very dark in the cold air. "Poison in a circle," the dwarf said, as if discussing the weather. "Bond. Contract. Not by human hands." - "Whose?" - "Who writes with ice?" asked the shorter one, laughing toothlessly. "Hel is sparing with ink, but thorough." - "He's hers?" I growled. - "He's his footsteps," said the taller one. "But footsteps walk in circles when the ring tells them where to go."

I looked at Eirik, who was standing in the doorway, arms crossed, chin hard. "I didn't know," he said, and he wasn't lying. Some people know and don't. The dwarf took a pair of pliers, grabbed the ring, and the thing hissed as if it had an opinion. "Runes laid threefold," he murmured. "Knot within a knot. Not pretty. Effective." - "Can you break it?" - "I can break anything. But not without a price." - "What price?" - "One pays with memory. One with skin. One with time.

Hel likes it threefold." He grinned, this time showing teeth that looked as if they could chew runes. "And someone has to want it." He looked at Eirik. "Do you want it?"

Eirik looked at me. For the first time, there was something soft about him that I didn't like because it hurt. "If I take off the ring, she'll get me faster," he said calmly. "If I don't take it off, she'll get you slower." - "Me?" - "You. All of you. Everything you are. Because you want to get me, even though you're supposed to let me go." Odin grinned somewhere, I swear. I wanted to say, "Screw the gods," but I knew that's something only people whose lives are of no interest to gods say.

At night, the giants attacked again, as if they had a calendar marked "once again." More of them, different, older, tougher. They carried stones with markings that weren't ours. I know what fear smells like. This one smelled of old frost and a promise signed incorrectly. "Hel sent them," said Svala, who senses things before she knows them. "Or someone who learned to write under her."

We stood in the snow, heavy, awake, and the houses burned faster than men run. The Jarlssohn shouted orders that evaporated in the fire. I sought the rhythm that only battles have when they last longer than your breath. On my left, one fell; on my right, one stood who wasn't. Eirik with me, the two of us an old knife. A giant wore a chain of bones around his neck—human ones, a string of beads of the wrong kind. He swung a club that had once been a tree. I ducked, heard the wood fly above me, felt air that wanted to be violent. Eirik pulled it, not much, just enough that his weight betrayed him. I jumped, axe sideways, blade low; the club fell, and the giant finally got that face that understands.

Children were running. A little girl stumbled and fell in front of a giant's foot, and I was too far away. Eirik wasn't. He threw himself, took her by the hip, rolled, and the foot landed where it had just been. He gave it to a woman who spat in his face—not out of contempt, but out of fear. He nodded and ran back, as if he had understood that thanks are the wrong currency in fire.

The dwarves were where you least expect them—among things. The smaller one crawled into the embers of a half-collapsed roof and emerged with a chain that looked as if it were woven from shadows. "Gleipnir is prettier," he said, "but for dogs. This one's for fools." He dropped it, and I stepped on it; the metal was warm, but not from fire. "Take him on," said the tall one, pointing at a giant who was too wise to die. The three of us fell on him—dwarf in front, me

on the side, Eirik on top—and the chain stretched as if it had hands. The giant roared, the chain sang. Not a song you sing to children.

It spun, as it always does when the world decides enough has died to justify the rest of the day. The giants retreated, slowly, reluctantly, like bad thoughts at a mass. A last one stepped back, looked at me, and made a sign with the flat of his hand—not a threat, not a greeting. Reminder. "They won't let it go," said Svala, standing there bloodied, as if she'd been given red gloves. "And neither will we," I replied.

Overnight, the dwarves and the darkness forged an idea I didn't like: to break the ring. Eirik sat at the anvil as if he were the workpiece. The tall one drew lines on his skin with soot, as if someone were giving fear a map. "First prize: memories," he said, looking at me. "You pay." - "What?" - "The warm pieces of your childhood. You remember how you laughed when you found the first fish too big? We'll take that. You can keep the rest." - "And if I don't give it?" - "Then it stays where it is. And you say later: 'I should have done it.'" I hate sentences you say later.

"Take it," I said. The dwarf placed his thumb on my forehead; it felt as if someone were carefully scraping off the varnish. A warmth rose up that wasn't from the fire. I searched for the spot inside me where Eirik and I share the axe, and there was... less. Not a hole. Empty. I exhaled sharply. "Second prize: skin," said the little man, grinning as if he were about to drop something. "You pay," he said to Eirik. "We don't cut, we lay. But it feels like cutting." "Do it," said Eirik. He made no sound as the blade wrote across the skin that until then had only known weather.

"Third prize: time," said the tall one. "Time takes what it can get. We'll take some of your morning, Hallgrim. You'll wake up later when it's burning." - "Then it'll just burn without me."

The hammer fell, three times, four times, nine times. Runes glowed, the ring hissed, jumped, fell into the grip, and twitched once more like an animal that doesn't know it's dead. The dwarf held it up, and it looked smaller than what he'd taken from us. "Gone," he said, and I realized I didn't know whether to cry or hit someone.

Eirik sat still, the skin on his arm reddened, not burned, but taught a lesson. I sat down next to him. Neither of us said anything until the fire died down. "Come with me," I said finally, for the tenth time and for the first time properly. He looked at his hand as if it were a knife he hadn't thrown. "I have children

here," he said. "And a wife who can't laugh when I'm not there." - "I have a village," I said. "And people who punch me in the face when I need them. I like to share a beating." He snorted, very quietly. "And Hel?" - "Hel has everyone," I said. "She's bad at losing. You too. That's fine." - "If I go, she'll come faster." - "If you stay, she'll come smarter." I sounded like Odin and hated myself for it.

In the morning, he stood with me at the edge of the square, where the snow was suspiciously clean. The earl's son pretended not to see us. I held my axe so it looked like a stick. "I'm coming," Eirik said. "If I'm coming, I won't be coming as a guest. I'll bring my ice." "I'll heat the fire," I said. "I've had practice." We hugged, briefly, hard, like men who know that the back is more important than the chest. His head smelled of smoke and snow. "Tell Father..." he began, and then broke off. "I won't tell him anything," I said. "The old bastard should listen for himself."

We left. Not dramatically, not with torches and songs. Ulf waited by the boat, Svala counted men, Torfi kept his mouth shut because he realized he couldn't think of any spectacles that didn't sound cheap. The dwarves stood on the shore, the tall one with his arms crossed, the short one with a smile that looked like someone had pressed a blade into warm grease. "If you need anything tied again," he called, "tie it yourself. We've tied enough." - "And if we need to untie something?" I called. - "Then pay beforehand," said the tall one. "Not afterward."

The sea took us as it always takes us: impersonally, reliably. I sat down on the thwart, watched the edge of the village shrink, and felt a rope tighten inside me, one I couldn't hold on to and couldn't let go of. Odin stood somewhere in a tree, acting as if it had all been his idea. Hel counted somewhere in the darkness, slowly, calmly, and in every case, came up with "one." The dwarves went back to the smithy, where the world feels like an honest lie.

"And?" Torfi finally asked, cautiously, as if speaking to a wound. "Brother?" "Brother," I said. "Not home yet." "Is he coming?" "If he's smart, yes. If he's stupid, too. Just differently." "And you?" "I'll drink," I said, "until one of us decides."

The sky fell heavily on the sea, the sea fell heavily on our boat, we fell heavily on our thoughts. A seagull cried as if it had an opinion about men. Ulf spat against the wind and won. Svala placed her hand briefly on the back of my neck, cold, but from the real world. I closed my eyes for a heartbeat and saw Yggdrasil holding the world, even though it doesn't hold still. There was no comfort. There was weight. Sometimes that's enough.

When we were far enough away that the village was just a speck, I raised the cup, which contained only air, and pretended to drink. "To the lost brother," I said. "May he find himself without losing us." The wind nodded. The sea did what it always does: It pretended to listen. And somewhere farther north, a man raised his axe as if explaining to a strange god how to spell "later."

Chapter 22 - Drinking Horn of Destiny

The wind had crept into the hall's chimney and was making a hoarse howl, as if it had smoked too much and slept too little. The fire was tired, the mead thin, faces heavy. I sat with my back to the post, my feet half in the straw, wondering if my head was buzzing from the mead or from life. Torfi gave me a look like a dog asking if he could overturn the table. Ulf was carving away at a piece of wood that would certainly never have made a beautiful animal. Freydís sat in such a way that everyone thought she was asleep, and anyone who thought so had burned their fingers on her at some point. Svala polished the blade as if the metal were a mirror with a bad character.

Then the door opened without asking. Not slowly, not quickly. As if the night had laid its hand on our shoulders. A man entered, thin as a dagger, his hair so dark the fire clung to it. He had a harp on his back and a bundle wrapped in wolf fur in his arms. He didn't nod. He acted as if he already knew everyone here, and that generally puts me in a bad mood.

"Skald," said the Jarl without rising from his chair.

"Call me what you like," said the thin man, his voice like mead passing itself off as water. "I'll bring a horn."

"We have horns," murmured Torfi.

"Not this one," said the skald, placing his bundle before the fire. He folded back the fur, and the hall grew a finger's breadth colder. The drinking horn lay there as if it had been waiting for us: as large as a forearm, not made of cow or aurochs, but something smoother, scaly. The wall shimmered as if a thin layer of ice lay inside and wouldn't melt. The tip ended in a small gold ring etched with runes that were only visible if you didn't look directly at them; as soon as you stared, they became shadows.

"That's not a cow horn," Svala said flatly.

"Wyrn," said the skald, as if discussing the weather. "Made from the skin of him who once lay by the spring and counted the stars. The runes are old. Some say: too old to be read. I say: old enough to be drunk."

"And why are you bringing this to us?" I asked.

He smiled without letting his face change. "Odin is tired of you always drinking and never listening."

"I'm listening," said Torfi. "The cup."

"Whoever drinks from it," the skald continued, "sees his fate. Not pretty, not polite. True enough to hurt."

"And if I don't want a fate?" asked Ulf.

"Then don't drink."

"What if I want two?" asked Torfi.

"Then drink twice and ruin both."

He raised the horn, and I could have sworn it grew heavier in his hand, as if pleased. He held it out to me so that the runes brushed past my cheek, and I felt as if they were giggling. "Hallgrim Ragnarson."

"Of course," I said. "I always go first if it's going to hurt."

"Or if it's fun," Freydis interjected.

I took the horn. It didn't smell of horn. It smelled of cold iron and a distant forest. It was empty. But when I put it to my lips, mead ran into it without anyone having poured it. It tasted like honey milked through ash. I drank, not much, just a good sip, the way a man drinks who wants to know but doesn't want to die. The hall tilted slightly. The fire became a hole. Someone spoke my name, but it wasn't here.

I stood in a field that wasn't a field. Beneath me was sand, in which bones stuck like white blades. In front of me was Fenrir, tall as a night that no one can make out. His breath was cold, but smelled of summer. I raised the axe, and it was too light. I ran, and my legs were mine, and then they weren't anymore. I saw myself fall, twice: once as a warrior who dies with a loud voice so he can believe in himself; once as an old man by the fjord, using the axe as a support

and gazing very quietly into the water, as if he had hidden an answer there that he can no longer remember. "Well?" said a voice behind me. Odin, of course, and the tone in which he says "well" is worse than any curse. I wanted to answer, but the sand flowed into my mouth, and the fire was back.

The hall had become loud without anyone speaking. My hand wasn't shaking, so I placed the horn on the table as if it were a knife to be shared. "Next," I said.

The next guy wasn't who I expected. Jobst, the German. Remember the one Ilse married, the one nobody wanted because she laughed louder than a storm and in the morning looked like she'd slept in a barrel? Jobst had that kind of face that thinks it's being polite and then forgets it. He squatted down, coughed once, reached into his pocket, and pulled out his... horn. Not for drinking. For smoking. A small, crooked fellow of a horn, with a hole at the top and another on the rim, and Jobst stuffed it full of some dark resin he'd "organized" in Holland when we once decided windmills were good targets. "That makes me happy," he said, stuck a spark in, pulled, and his head fell back as if the ceiling had suddenly become very interesting. Ilse sat next to him, her arms folded, her eyes half-closed; She liked him the way you like a crooked nail that still holds the door shut.

"You don't drink?" asked Torfi.

"I'm smoking the gods," said Jobst, grinning softly. He blew out a cloud that resembled someone I didn't recognize. "Hey, there's a whale swimming in the roof," he said, laughing so quietly that you couldn't hear it, only saw it.

Svala snorted. "Drink first, then talk." She took the horn without asking, raised it, and drank—not a lot, but enough to show she knew how much a knife should weigh. Her pupils dilated, as if they knew they were supposed to see more than they'd like. Her mouth narrowed. "I see myself at a bridge," she whispered. "Gjallarbrú. I'll cross without paying. And then I'll turn around and someone will say, 'That's new.'" She blinked, put the horn down. "It'll take a while."

The Jarl acted as if he wasn't interested in any of this. The Horn ignored him, which I kind of liked.

Then Torfi drank. Torfi first saw himself in a pile of furs, of course, and two women rolling their eyes as if they knew the better joke. Then his face turned

pale. "I'll see you..." he said, "...betraying you. For mead." He laughed, but it sounded like a knife slipping on stone. "So it's not new."

"Then do it differently," Freydís said dryly. "Betray us for something better."

"Gold?" he tried.

"Honor," she said, grinning in a way that made him know she didn't quite mean it.

Jobst blew his horn again, and this time I saw something open in his eyes like a hatch. "There are these little fellows standing there," he murmured, pointing at the ground, "they have hats made of moss and names like... Cork and... Nils?" Ilse groaned. "He's been breathing the Dutch again." Jobst nodded to himself. "They say the Jarl's a goose." Then he laughed loudly, and the Jarl acted as if he were very far away.

It wasn't long before half the village wanted to drink. One saw his wife in another's bed, whereupon he grabbed him at the table, and the two rolled through the straw until Freydís ended the conversation with the flat of her blade. An old woman drank and began to cry, so quietly that it seeped through her fingers; later she said she saw her husband young again, apologizing for something only she knew. A boy drank and claimed he saw the sky fall; he began stacking boards on top of each other to raise it again. Jobst smoked the god next to him and explained statics to him.

The runes on the horn moved when no one was looking. I once caught them trying a new sign that didn't fit with the others. It looked like a grin. "Loki," Freydís said suddenly, very clearly, as if she'd stepped on his foot in the crowd. The door opened without asking (the door was far too open that evening), and there he stood: slim, too smooth, a smile like a blade on his sleeve. "You look magnificent," he said. "So unsettled."

"Go," said Svala. "We already have enough guests who lie."

"I never lie," said Loki. "I convince truths to sit more beautifully."

He plucked the horn from the table and turned it over, as if searching for the place where the lie would come out. "It was only borrowed," he said. "I... corrected the runes. A little. So Odin wouldn't get bored. And so you over there"—he gestured vaguely in the direction where the future resides—"don't become too confident."

"You give it back," I said.

"What do you give back?" he smiled. "Debt? Love? Mead?"

"Teeth," said Freydís, standing up.

He raised his hands. "Calm down. I'm not here for you. I'm here for him." He pointed to Jobst, who was negotiating with the invisible dwarves over the rooftops. "He's smoking my resin."

"Yours?" Jobst coughed, "that was from the market!"

"Everything from the market is mine," Loki said proudly. "Anywhere there's a lie, and that's everywhere."

The hall vibrated as if a giant had sneezed in the roof. The wind shifted, the fire tilted, and outside, something that wasn't weather beat against the planks. The door really did fly open like an offended axe. Thor stood there. Wet beard, wet cloak, Mjölnir casual as an insult. "The horn," he growled, and the note was deep enough that my cup vibrated. "Now."

"You need it for the feast," Loki said innocently. "I know." He weighed the horn. "But first, let's play."

"We're not playing," Thor said, taking a step into the hall. The floor creaked and decided to grow old early. "We're drinking. And we're interpreting."

"It's the same thing," said Loki.

I was already standing. "If it means drinking, I'm in." Thor grinned, that lightning-before-thunder grin. "You again," he grumbled. "That goat here?" He pointed to the one in the corner (our farm goat, who had appeared again out of nowhere, nibbling on the mead barrel like it was in debt).

"Outside," said the Jarl weakly, "please."

We made room. The benches were pushed against the wall, the straw removed, the furs set aside. Torfi ran as if he were the master of ceremonies after an accident. Ulf rolled the barrels nearby, Freydís tied the muzzle of the dog that usually steals someone's victory by eating their slippers.

"Rules?" I asked.

"Don't spill a drop," said Thor.

"That's not a rule," said Svala. "That's poetry."

Loki held the horn between us. "You drink. You see. And you say what you see. Whoever lies loses. Whoever remains silent loses. Whoever laughs is cursed." He winked. "That was a lie about laughter. Laughter saves."

I took a sip. Mead filled the hollow again, like water in a mouth. I drank. Not too much. Enough. This time it came faster. No field, no Fenrir. A beach, our beach. Eirik stood with his back to me, his shoulders heavy, his hands empty. Beside him were the dwarves, holding the ring that was no longer one. Hel stood far away, pretending to look the other way. "Later," Odin said in my ear, "is just another word for 'too late.'" I wanted to hit him. I couldn't reach him. The water moved backward, and I realized I couldn't stop what wasn't in my hands.

I exhaled, put down the horn. Thor raised it, took aim, and emptied it, as if it were a question of the weather. His eyes went completely empty for a heartbeat, like pools of frost. He laughed as the color returned. "I see myself defying Odin," he said. "And he laughs. I hate it when he laughs. Take it!"

He threw me the horn. I caught it. The hall hummed as if the rafters had been drinking along. Loki sat on the edge of the table, swinging his legs as if he were the innkeeper's son. Outside, a storm began to rage. Not normal. The wind was too sudden, the roof draped low like a fighter trying not to hit. I smelled ozone. "Odin is listening," Freydís said quietly. "Worst guest of all."

Jobst took a breath through his smoke horn, giggled, and pointed into the corner. "There's a horse with eight legs," he whispered reverently. "And it has my voice. It says: Jobst, you're a good man. You should..." - "...shut up," Ilse finished, pushing his head down so he wouldn't fall off his chair.

The fight—of course there was one—started when one of Hrolf's lads was drinking, saw that his brother would one day beat him, and decided to bide his time. They charged each other, but the ground was slippery with mead and truth, and they saw something in their faces that frightened them so much that they both stopped. "I'll hate you later," said one. "Today I'll drink with you." That was the wisest thing Hrolf did that year.

Thor and I drank our way through two hours that weren't hours. I saw myself in Miklagard, the shield in my hand, which rings hollow when tapped. I saw myself on the Golden Island, blood in the sand, Fenrir on the dune, who doesn't come, only counts. I saw myself old and without an axe; I saw myself young and

without a head. Thor saw thunderstorms that disobeyed him, and a girl who laughed when he stumbled, and I didn't ask who it was, because gods embroider their shame on hats.

The storm tore at the hall, squealing like old men. A crack in the roof let snow through, the flakes melting in the air as if they had no desire to land. Loki suddenly stood beside me and whispered: "Your destiny is not to win. It's to keep drinking when it's empty." "That's no consolation," I said. "It's the truth," he said, pulling the horn from my hand as if I'd lent it to him.

"The horn," Thor growled warningly.

"Come right back." Loki smiled sweetly and bitterly. "Maybe."

"We're not done," I said, my voice sounding harsher than I felt.

"You're never finished," Odin said somewhere, and the thunder growled like an old dog.

Then everything happened at once. The door burst open, because it was now muscle memory. A gust of wind ripped through the hall, lifting Jobst's cloud of smoke, which formed into a woman who resembled Ilse, only friendlier. Ilse swiped at her and met with nothing but air. Thor raised Mjölner, not as a threat, but more as a final word. Loki winked, made a small, ugly gesture with his fingers, and the horn was... gone. Simply no longer there. The runes lingered in the air for another heartbeat, as if they had the courtesy of saying goodbye. Then: nothing.

"You bastard," said Thor, but without anger. With weariness. Gods get tired when the world is too strange.

"It was only borrowed," said Loki, hopping backward through the door as if he were having a bad dream. "Thanks for the fun!"

The storm stopped, like a man falling asleep mid-curse. The hall sank into an aftershock that hung more in their hearts than in the rafters. People were talking again, as if it were normal to vomit the future in the middle of the night. Jobst lay half-lying on the table, grinning blissfully, his eyes glazed over. "I kissed a goat," he whispered contentedly. "And she said yes." Ilse sighed, stroking his hair from his forehead. "If you smoke that horn again, Jobst, I'll smoke you."

"Just one more time," he begged, like a child who knows he's about to get beaten but still wants the cookie.

Torfi sat down next to me, letting his head fall back. "I've seen how I grow old," he said quietly. "And how I don't grow old. I'll take the first. But I won't forget the second."

"That's how it is for everyone," I said. "The smart ones pretend they don't know they're dying. The stupid ones pretend it's tomorrow. We'll drink for both of them."

We didn't clean up. We lay down in the straw where we stood, like men who've let gravity win for once. The wind hung outside, offended that no one was listening anymore. I slept badly. Not because of the images. Because of the voice that said, "Keep drinking when it's empty." I wanted to ask if that was a threat or a prescription. I didn't have a cup in my hand.

The morning was too bright and too honest. The smoke hung as always, the fire acted as if it had never been out. On the table lay a piece of wood, smooth, round, with carved symbols that looked as if they had been made by children and signed by gods. Beneath it, someone scrawled in large, pretty handwriting: Thanks for the fun. – L.

The Jarl looked at me as if I were the postman of the gods. "And now?" he asked.

"Well, nothing," I said. "We'll pretend we've never seen the horn. And if we do, we'll drink differently."

"How?" asked Torfi, who looked like an idea that had been left in the sun for too long.

"More conscious," I said.

"That's a bad word," he muttered.

"Then we'll drink defiantly," said Freydís. "Anyone can do that."

Jobst padded past me, the small smoker's bone in his hand, which Ilse was already searching for. "I'm bigger than yesterday," he whispered. "Because I've shrunk."

"Leave that stuff alone," I said.

"Just one more time," he said. "Just one more time, until I can't remember anymore."

"That's exactly what I want," said Svala from behind him. "That you want it again."

I stepped outside. The fjord pretended to be innocent. The air smelled of wood, of old snow, of things that can't decide whether to become or remain. I held my head up into the cold morning and heard Odin laughing in my neck, so quietly you only notice it when you're ashamed. "I'll keep drinking," I said to the air. "Even if it's empty." And I knew that wasn't courage. It was the only thing I could do.

Later, they'd say the horn was just a toy. Or a test. Or a trick that was too good to be one. I knew: It was a mirror. And mirrors never lie—they just point rudely.

In the evening, we placed cups on the table again. No magic, no storm, just mead and time. Jobst didn't smoke. Ilse held his hand. Torfi told the fake story about the real man until it sounded right. Ulf continued carving his ugly animal, which in the end looked like a dog that knew us. Freydís smiled once, illicitly. Svala looked at me as if she knew I wanted to die too soon again. "Not today," she said.

"Not today," I said. "Today we drink to that which promises nothing and delivers."

The hall breathed. The wind outside, too. And somewhere, far away, someone raised a horn we were missing and drank to us, because we had done it for him. I imagined Loki taking the first sip and Thor the second, and Odin pretending he didn't need anything to know what mead tastes like. I raised my cup. "To fate," I said. "And to a thirst that lasts longer." The runes in my head didn't stop running. But they ran in circles, and in the middle of them we sat, laughing, cursing, breathing. And drinking. Even when it was empty.

Chapter 23 - Ragnarök in installments

The morning smelled of metal, and the sky was the same color as old tin. I sat in my usual spot by the post, my feet in the straw, wondering whether the mead had grown thinner or my patience. The farm goat lay curled up like a pile of fur, blowing little clouds from its nostrils as if practicing smoking. Outside,

the wind scraped against the shingles like a knife on bone. Winter was still there, but it acted as if it were already on its way south.

The first sign was the raven. Not Huginn or Muninn—no polite emissary with a golden calling card—but an ordinary, cheeky one, with a beak that had seen too much. It knocked on the door. Three times. Counted, as if someone had trained it. Torfi opened it, looked at the bird, the bird looked at Torfi, then tilted its head and croaked: "Hallgrim." Not "caw," not "food," not "get lost." Hallgrim. Beautifully pronounced, as if it had once been in a better hall.

"I hate educated birds," I muttered, standing up. The raven hopped past me like a rich merchant who doesn't say hello, and pecked at my cup as if checking if I was still drinking. "I'm already drinking," I said. "You're bringing mail, or are you just in a bad mood?" The raven blinked slowly, nudged the cup so it tipped, and then flapped its wings as if offended that the world has no waiters.

The second sign was the goat. She was asleep, as I said, and then she began to speak. Not really speaking—the tongue is short, the world is long—but she murmured sentences in her sleep that anyone who'd ever had too much mead could understand. "Two suns..." she grumbled, "one of them cold... Water burns..." She smacked her lips as if she had truth in her mouth and it tasted like old straw. Ilse—whom no one wanted and whom Jobst got because the world has a sense of humor—stood beside her, folded her arms. "When the goat starts playing prophets, we'll start to sober up." Jobst nodded, as if hearing a new god. "I can help," he said, fumbling for his smoke horn. I took it from him before the hall smelled of Holland.

Torfi found the third sign in the fjord: a piece of chain, as light as wool and as strong as a bad promise. "You don't wear something like that around your neck," he said, placing it on the table in front of me. The metal was as smooth as lies. Runes danced on it if you just glanced at it with the corner of your eye. "Gleipnir," Freydís said, without taking her eyes off the knife she was sharpening. "Or a relative." She spat into the embers. "If the chain is lying around here, it's best not to ask what just became available somewhere else."

Later in the day, the sky suddenly turned green. Not a beautiful green, not the northern lights green that makes children go "ah" and the old people talk about the old days. This was the green of metal that hangs in your throat. The fjord began to steam, even though the air was cold, and on the far shore the birch trees burned along their thin bark, ever so finely, as if someone had applied glowing threads to them. "Jarl!" someone yelled. The jarl stepped out, looked around, and did what jarls do when the world gets too big: he tried to smile

very small. "Hush," he said. "The weather is playing tricks on us." The raven laughed. I swear: a raven can laugh when the joke is at someone else's expense.

In the night, Heimdall came. Not with fanfare, not with horns. With a light that was too ordinary for our region. A narrow, clear beam that cut the air into glasses, and in it—on the rainbow bridge, which you're not supposed to see if you want to keep your sanity—stood a man with eyes so bright they put you in a bad mood. He had the bearing of a man who keeps lists. I don't like people who keep lists.

"Hallgrim Ragnarson," he said without coming any closer—probably someone had told him our shingles weren't regular. "Heimdall," I said, my mouth dry without anyone having stolen my mug. "Guardian of the Bridge, Keeper of Order. You look like you have a stomachache."

He pressed his lips together. "Things are... not going according to plan." He spoke as if he were enumerating. "Fenrir is restless. Jörmungandr is showing himself too often and too close. Loki is rehearsing. Thor is drinking. Odin is brooding so loudly that he can be heard on Midgard." He looked at his boots as if they contained wisdom. "And I have goat hair in the soles."

"The goat hair is the worst thing you have right now?" Freydís asked dryly from the back. Heimdall ignored her, which is reasonable if you don't want to be grounded. "There are deviations," he continued. "Ragnarök... trickles down. An event here, one there. It..." He searched for a word big enough and found none. "...it's unprofessional."

"Maybe the world would rather start dying slowly," I said. "Rather than taking a cold bath than jumping into the ice."

Heimdall blinked as if I'd offended the grammar. "You must delay. I'm not here for... improvisation." He raised a hand and held his fingers as if pulling unseen strings. "Odin will speak later. Keep your... villagers... from doing stupid things en masse."

"It's like trying to stop wolves from howling," said Svala. "We're good at howling."

Heimdall nodded so stiffly his neck creaked. "Then... cry in an orderly fashion." He dissolved into light that was too clean for us, and I stood there with the feeling that I had just been scolded by a project manager.

The next morning, the men were fishing backward. Not by accident. The fish were swimming backward. Jobst tilted his head, as if trying to sympathize with them. "Maybe they want to get back into the nets," he said hopefully. Ilse gave him the look she usually gives when uncorking barrels. "They want to turn their backs on the future, you idiot."

Then the giant brothers came. Tall as houses, shoulders like two boats. They said they were just passing through, and no one believed them. "Names?" asked the Jarl. "Bork and Harg," said the taller one, and I immediately felt sorry for their mothers. They sat down, taking half the space from each man, and started drinking like they were catching up on the winter. Thor appeared because he can smell when giants drink. He walked through the door, Mjölfnir in hand, and looked at the two of them like they were two bad decisions on their feet. "Not here," the Jarl said immediately. Thor smiled, and every piece of wood in the hall twitched. "I'm a guest," he grumbled. "I only fight outside." We went out. Bork hit first, Harg second, Thor last. That was enough. The earth cracked, the kind you could still see in the potatoes, and the fjord made that deep sound as if someone had punched it on the stomach. In the end, Bork and Harg lay in the snow, laughing their heads off, and vowed to come back when the weather was better. Thor wiped his beard and said that winter didn't suit him; it slipped when he struck.

In the evenings, the elders sat together, muttering prophecies they had never liked and trying to downplay them. "Ragnarök will come when it comes," said the oldest of them, scratching his ear as if there were something there he didn't want to hear. "Perhaps the raven means another village." "Or another world," Jobst speculated, searching for his horn again and unable to find it, because Ilse had already hung it from the ceiling for the fifth time.

At night, the snow burned. Not really. Thinly. A faint flame on the surface, blue like bad dreams. A child shouted, we ran, kicked, shoveled with our hands. The flames went out, as if they were bored. Svala smelled her fingers. "No pitch, no oil," she said. "It burns because it wants to burn." I smelled nothing but fear and cold iron.

I was asleep when the dream came. Or it wasn't a dream. Odin stood at the edge of something that was a root or an abyss. His eye was a hole full of certainty. "You're delaying," he said, as if it were the most extreme thing one could say to a man. "You're good at dawdling." I cursed; respect runs thin with me. "Say what you will." He raised his hand, holding something that made a sound in the air like a horn that can't be heard. "Gjallarhorn," he said.

"Heimdall's. It was... scratched. Intentionally. Loki wants to make it fragile, so it will call either too soon or too late. You bring me the missing piece."

"So I'll steal the alarm button from the gods," I said. "Gladly. When?"

"In installments," he said, grinning as if he had a sense of humor. "One piece today, another tomorrow, the day after tomorrow courage." I hate it when gods are funny. "Where?" I growled. "Where he wants to rehearse," said Odin. "In the hall that has no walls. Under the hill that no one sees. Ask those who are too small to be asked."

The ones who were too small were the dwarves. I went to the smithy, where the air always smelled of stories. The tall dwarf—the one who bites runes like nails—looked at me as if he'd already seen too much to be polite. "Piece of horn," I said. "The one where the air still screams." He nodded. "He had it ground for us," said the short one. "Loki pays on time, but in lies. We take those when the cash register wants to be fun." They led me to the back of the smithy, where the light never really reached. In a box that smelled of old snow lay a splinter, smooth, bright, so thin it was almost not there. I took it, and my fingers tingled. "You could cut a wind with that," said the tall one. "Or an hour. Depending on how bad your conscience is."

We set off before the village could sort out its excuses. Ulf at the helm, Svala with the gaze that had been docking further ahead for years, Freydís as calm as a knife on a table. Torfi was silent, which meant he was thinking. Jobst wasn't allowed to come because Ilse had given him back the horn, and he was already arguing with the dwarves in the roof by the doorway. The fjord lay gray and still, but beneath the water there was something that wasn't still; you could see the rings that nothing on the surface caused.

We headed toward the hill that no one saw until they did: a bump in the landscape that was only there if you weren't looking directly at it. At its base was a hole, or an idea of a hole. "In there," I said, and no one said "you first," because they knew I would do it anyway.

Inside, there was air that glides. Not a real wind, more like a sound that wanted to touch your skin. The hall had no walls, but you knew they were there: pressure that made your ribs count. In the middle, a platform made of nothing, and on it lay the horn—not quite, but enough so that anyone who used the head knew that it could awaken worlds. Loki stood beside it, his hands behind his back, softly whistling a tune that never ended.

"You again," he said without turning around. "You're like a scar. Always there when it itches."

"I'm just taking what you stole from us," I said.

"I didn't steal anything," he said. "I just borrowed time. I'm bringing it back, just differently."

He turned around and looked at us as if we were a cart of peppercorns he had to value at the market. "Show me," he said. "The splinter." I held him tighter. "You know you're giving it to me," he said kindly. "You always give me what you don't want to give."

"Not today," I said.

He smiled, as if I'd told a joke he already knew. "Heimdall will blow if he can blow," he said, and Torfi giggled idiotically, because "blow" always has two meanings in his head. "Odin will growl, Thor will snarl, Hel will count, and you will run." He took a step closer, and I smelled what wasn't his: a hint of sage, of coal, of old blood, and fresh honey. "Give it here."

"Take it," I said, raising the axe.

He took it. Not with his hand. With a glance. The splinter twitched in my hand as if it were alive, and jumped—not far, just into the space between us, where it hung, ticking like a mosquito. Svala shot. The arrow went through and came out the back without ever having been there. "Fine," said Loki. "I've ground the thing so it lives between yes and no."

"Like you," said Freydís.

"Like all of us," he said, bowing in her direction in a conciliatory manner.

I did what I always do when deities fill my head with words: I became rude. I leaped forward, swung, and struck not Loki—you don't strike fog—but the horn. Not the whole thing, just the edge, where the missing part should have been. The blow made a sound that didn't belong in the world. Something snapped, but not where I saw it. The splinter fell. I caught it, and it didn't burn my hand. It was suddenly just... a thing. No space, no maybe. "Thank you," I said, and Loki laughed, so softly it made me sick.

"Good," he said. "Now it's really starting."

Outside, as we stepped out of the Void Hall, the sky growled. Not thunder. Something deeper. The snow began to fall, though a moment ago the air had been too hard for it. The light grew dimmer, as if brushed by fingers that weren't pure. Down on the shore, two yellow dots stood on a hill that wasn't one. Fenrir's eyes. No leap, no bite. He only watched, like someone who can read a clock. Across the fjord, a ridge rose briefly, endless, too long for any understanding. Jörmungandr drew his line under the calculation and dived again. Our planks whined.

"Get in the boat," said Ulf, and his voice had that tone it only has when he knows the wind won't take any more credit today. We pushed off, rowing, the oars biting into the water as if they had teeth. Behind us remained the hill that wasn't one. In front of us lay the village that believed us—and would hate us if we got it wrong now.

Halfway there, the rain started to snow. Yes, that's what it felt like. Every drop was a flake, every flake a drop. Svala cursed softly, as if praying in a foreign language. Freydís put her hand on the back of my neck, briefly, coldly, and I felt straighter. Torfi looked as if he'd forgotten his courage somewhere and was hoping the wind would find it. "Talk to me later if I drink too much," he said without being asked. "Today I'm right to drink."

In the village, they were already standing outside, because no one wants to be inside when something bigger than themselves is starting up outside. Heimdall wasn't there—project managers love to be away when things get messy. Odin was there, but not visible. He can do that. Thor arrived later, his footsteps heavy as if there were snow in his shoes. Loki was everywhere and nowhere, like a bad mood.

I placed the splinter on the table where we usually gutted the fish. It looked pitiful. "Is that all?" asked the Jarl, as if he were a customer at the market. "That's enough," said the dwarf from the smithy behind me. "That's all you need to rip up for an hour."

"And what do we do now?" he asked. "Now," I said, looking into the hall, where the goat was asleep again and Jobst was staring at the ceiling, "now we do what we always do: We drink, we sharpen, we look at the sky, we run when it falls. But we run late."

Night came too early and crouched like a dog at the door. The children stopped playing, even though no one called "stop." An old woman sang a song that only had half a verse left. The raven came back, pecked at the edge of the table, and

said my name again, this time differently: softly, as if it knew it would have to be quiet soon.

I wasn't sleeping. Not really. I lay there, my hand on the axe, the splinter beside me, listening to the beams converse with the wind. I thought of Eirik, standing somewhere with his new ice, counting what was left. I thought of Hel, who is in no hurry. I thought of Heimdall, gathering leaves and hoping the tree forgets to make new ones. I thought of myself, sitting in a hall where time sometimes drops by like a neighbor who never had to introduce himself. There are men who pray on nights like these. I cursed. That's my kind of prayer.

Towards morning—if you can call it that, when it's barely getting light—Thor came, sat down next to me, and carefully placed Mjölnir on the bench, as if he were a child who shouldn't be annoyed today. "Dribbling," he grumbled. "In installments," I said. He nodded slowly. "I prefer it when it bangs. Then I know who to hit."

"You hit everything," I said.

"Some things are too early," he admitted, scratching his beard, from which snow was falling that hadn't melted today. "Heimdall wants to wait. I don't want to. Odin wants to be wise. Loki wants..." He searched for a word that wasn't "everything." "...want to play."

"And us?" I asked.

"You breathe," he said. "Longer than most."

A whooshing sound rippled through the air, so quiet that only the dogs raised their heads. Somewhere far away, someone blew into something no human blows. A test note. Heimdall or someone who had practiced with him. It was brief. It was enough. Something in my gut made a list. Cold. Hunger. Anger. Courage. Love. Guilt. Laughter. I ran my thumb over the splinter, and it felt like a yes that didn't have much left.

"If it starts," I said to Thor, "we'll be too late."

"If it's drizzling, you'll be on time," he said, standing up. "I'll get the goat." He left, and for a moment his back looked like that of a very tired man who is carrying too much responsibility that he can't let go of.

Around midday—that is, around the time when one is tired of being awake—nothing happened. And that was the worst of it. The village stood there and did

what villages do when they know heaven owes them something: It counted pots and children and looked out into the fjord, which acted as if it were innocent. Jobst didn't smoke. Ilse held his hand, tightly, as if it were a new prayer. Svala stood at the gate and looked behind the trees. Freydís laid the blade beside her and closed her eyes once, so briefly that only one person noticed. Ulf pulled the oar out from under the roof and stroked it, as if checking whether it was ready to be a good bone.

Then snow fell. Softly, unconditionally. And in every flake was a small, hard no. I raised my head, breathed, tasted iron. "Now," I said. "Not yet," Odin answered from somewhere. "Always like this," Loki said, laughing. Heimdall leafed through his rules. Thor cursed. Hel counted. And we stood there with a shard in our bag, promising nothing but one more minute.

Ragnarök didn't begin. It was already here. It came in installments, like rent you can't pay and visitors you didn't invite. We did what people do who know they're dying and don't feel like putting a smile on their faces: We drank, we sharpened, we kissed, we argued, we held the door shut and opened it anyway. I sat down, placed the splinter before me, and said to the hall: "We're late, but we're coming." The hall answered as halls answer: It creaked, it breathed, it stopped.

And somewhere beyond the trees, a little beyond the place where the sky refuses to be right, Fenrir raised his nose, sniffed the future, and decided that patience is also a kind of hunger.

Chapter 24 - The Return of the Redbeard Witch

The fjord looked as if someone had cut a vein in the water. Thin red streaks drifted between the ice floes like sick fish, and the wind smelled of metal and bad dreams. I sat in the hall at the same old post, my feet in the straw, and the mead tasted as if it had laughed at us yesterday. Torfi was carving a small goat with a knife that had more stories than sharpness, which looked suspiciously like a very ugly dog. Ulf pretended to oil the rudder, but I knew the look: It was the look of a man who would gladly slap the sky, if only the sky would come down.

The first sign was the children. They woke up at the same time—not one by one, not with the usual whining—but in sync, as if someone had counted their ribs in their sleep and said "now." Each one stared in the same direction and

murmured, "The woman with the firebeard." Freydís, who rarely frightens, blinked more slowly than usual. "Redbeard," she said. "She smells of burnt herbs and wet fur." The jarl did what jarls do when prophecies creep through the smoke: He ordered someone to stoke the fire. As if warmth would keep the world from getting serious.

The second omen was the goat. Our goat sometimes dreams aloud, especially when she drinks from barrels that don't belong to her. But today she stood as still as a post, staring into the void, as if the void had finally stared back. Her lips moved, and it wasn't the usual "baa," but something like "Shhh...kuld." Ilse—the same Ilse no one wanted and whom Jobst got twice in return—crossed her arms as if she were about to cut the runes in the air. "If even the cattle are whispering names from the Thread House, maybe we should listen to the gods." Jobst, proud and reliable as a crooked shelf, nodded seriously and dug out his smoke horn. "I can hear better when I smell the Dutch." I took the horn from his hand and pushed it far away. "Not today, you cloud climber."

The third omen was the fjord. It was rushing backward. Not really, not in big waves—just as if someone were gently pulling at the edge of the water. Fish twitched to the surface, turning their bellies the wrong way. Svala held her hand over the tide and squinted, as if trying to calculate the current. "Something's pulling," she said. "From the east, not from the sea." Freydís murmured, "Someone's pulling," and it didn't sound like weather.

The elders pulled an old blanket from memory that they called "Grandmother's Word": When the fjord thinks backward and the goat knows the Norns, the witch turns red again. I hadn't forgotten the Redbeard Witch. No one forgot a woman whose beard truly glowed when she cursed and burned the herbs that bore names. We had cracked her wand back then, scared away her crows, and ruined her ritual so badly that even Loki had snickered. Since then, I'd been silent—but silent as a knife in a sheath.

Towards evening, the snow briefly turned pink with each flutter of flakes, as if someone were sprinkling it with blood too fine to stick. Jobst stood in the doorway, looked out toward the fjord, and whispered, "She's coming on a raft." Ilse snorted. "You can see things even in the fog." I stepped beside him, and even my eyes, which had seen more stupidity than beauty, had to admit: There was a shadow on the water, flatter than a boat, wider than our hall. As it came closer, I saw what it was: bones, a carpet of ribs and vertebrae, bound together with tendons that had their own glow. On it stood she. The Redbeard Witch. Her beard glowed, not like a fire, more like an ember tended for years. Seagulls

circled around her—but not ones you gut and roast. Jet-black gulls with crazy, red eyes that loved metal.

"Hallgrim Ragnarson," she called, and the fjord made a wave of my name. "You stole my winter. I'll take it back—with interest." I raised my hand, not in greeting. "Your winter was ill-seasoned," I called back. "Send it to someone who deserves cold."

The beard flamed brighter. "This time I'll erase you from history. You'll never have drunk. Never laughed. Never died. You'll never have been." She held out her hand, and the wind twisted as if it had eaten too much. A scent of burnt herbs and wet fur crept over the water.

"That never thing," Ulf grumbled, "is rude." I felt my name shifting in my head, as if it weren't quite there anymore. Next to me, Torfi said, "What's my name?" and looked at Svala in panic. "That guy," she said dryly. "We'll put a sign around your neck later."

The curse was a wave. Not water. Words. It bounced off the hall wall, ran up the beam, bounced on heads, slid down hands. Men stood open-mouthed for a heartbeat, as if entangled in their own names. Freydís hissed and, with a flourish, pulled three symbols into the air that tasted of iron. The word bounced, half the hall called itself correctly again, the other half muttered "I am..." and froze. I grabbed Torfi by the collar. "You're Torfi." - "Are you sure?" - "Unfortunately."

Odin came at night, in a dream, of course, because he has a habit of appearing when you're already defenseless. He stood there as if he weren't there, and his eyes gleamed like something that sees you first and then understands you.

"You want to slay them with an axe and a curse," he said. "I love your simplicity." - "And?" - "And you'll negotiate too. With water, with thread, with someone who matters down below." - "Hel?" - "Is he still sulking about something else? No. Skuld." He smiled crookedly. "The future likes to write with cold ink."

I woke up with resentment in my mouth and the taste of bad mead. When I stepped out, the fjord was steaming. Freydís had called Njörd—quietly, carefully, with a sacrificial liquor so good it was almost a sin. The fjord hummed, like an animal that knows its owner's name. It helped—and it didn't. Because with the humming came things from the depths that became curious. Gray backs, too long, too flexible, with heads that looked as if they had teeth all the way to their foreheads. "I just wanted peace," Freydís growled, as the first

shadow bumped into the boat and rubbed itself against the wood as if it were its furry scratching post. "There will be peace later," I said. "If we've never been."

Thor came in—not through the door. He came through the wind. He suddenly stood in the courtyard, as if someone had left him there, and Mjölnir hung in his hand like a growling laugh. "Redbeard," he grumbled. "I hate this." - "You'll help?" I asked. - "First mead," he said honestly. "Then I'll hit you." I pointed to the best barrel, and the Jarl didn't say no, because sometimes a beating costs more than drinks. Thor drank, snorted, wiped his beard with the thong, and looked at me as if offering me a second life. "We'll go out on the water," I said. "To their bone raft." - "Aye," he said, grinning.

We prepared the boat as if we were getting married: new seams in the sails, pitch in the cracks, ropes doubled and tripled as if you had children who didn't believe you. Ulf stood at the helm like a tailor stroking his finest fabric. Svala tested arrows, each tip a promise. Freydís tied small knots in strands of rope—runes known only to hands. Torfi tied a shield to his back and one to his stomach so he could later boast he'd carried two lives. Jobst stood there holding his smoking horn like a gambler holding his last coin. Ilse looked at him and just raised an eyebrow. He put the horn away.

We pushed off. The fjord was smooth, but beneath it, something moved that knew no rest. I felt the current, moving not with us, not against us, but past us, like a pilgrim begging you to move out of the way. The raft of bones lay further out, still as a swan that has decided it won't peck your eyes out today. As we got closer, I saw that stretched between the bones were small red threads, fine as spider webs, but they held the remains of things: strands of hair, teeth, beads, pieces of rune sticks. "She's collecting," Freydís said, and I hated her for being right.

"Hallgrim," the witch called across the water. "Do you want to negotiate?" "I always negotiate," I called back, "but my axe has a say." She laughed, and her beard glowed, smelling of resin. "Fine. I offer you: Never. I give you: Never. I leave you: Nothing." "I offer you," I called, "a sledgehammer and a friendly parting nudge."

She raised the staff—no, not a staff. Something that had once been a staff, before someone taught it to taste words. The air around the tip darkened, as if drawing night from the day. "Erasing," she murmured, and the word made my fingers numb.

Water broke beside us, and a hand grabbed for the side of the ship—not a hand. Something like a hand, too long, with too many joints, with nails that looked like sucked-on knives. Behind them, faces, pale, half-forgotten, hair floating in the water as if it had a mind of its own. Undead. Vikings dragged from their slumber just to ruin the scene. “Don’t fall,” Ulf said needlessly. Svala shot, and the arrow lodged in an eye that never blinked. Freydís ripped a bundle of salt from her pocket, threw it in a circle that never made a complete mark—and yet. The thing hissed, retreated. Thor slashed as if to split the water, and the water at least pretended to think twice.

"Left!" yelled Torfi, and to the right came the first hook. Men who weren't men pulled on ropes that should never have gotten wet. I kicked, cut, cursed, the boat creaked, and the fjord laughed. A gray back rose up beside us—no whale, no fish, nothing with a name, certainly not ours—and nudged the boat as if testing whether we had eggs. "Njörd!" yelled Freydís, but the god was busy regulating water elsewhere. "I'll bring fish later!" I yelled, and sometimes a poor bribe works better than a prayer.

"Now!" Ulf shouted, and we tacked hard, so close to the bone raft that I could see the burned marks on the vertebrae. The witch smiled—a smile that didn't belong to a mouth, but to an idea. "Too late," she said, raising her staff higher. "Skuld has cooled the ink."

"Skuld!" I cried, because Odin had placed her name in my dream, like one shoves a stick into a dog's snout. "Show yourself! Or at least give me a blunt needle!" The wind fell silent for a second, as if afraid of cutting something. Then she was there. Not there. An edge in the air. A girl, a woman, a face you forget as soon as you really want to look at it—and that is the greatest courtesy the future has. In her hand, a thread so fine that only by its resistance did it betray its existence.

"You have bad manners," said Skuld. Her voice was neither near nor far. "But you have a thick neck. I like that." - "She never wants to have made me," I said, and when a man says that about himself, his mouth tastes of earth for a moment. - "She wants to untie the knot that binds you," said Skuld matter-of-factly. "If I let him, you'll be an anecdote no one can tell." - "Don't let him," I said. - "That's bribery without payment." - "I'll pay with noise," I said. "And with what I don't want later: regret." Skuld looked at me (or pretended to). "You often pay with regret," she observed. "But it's always fresh." Then she nodded curtly, pulled the thread taut, and somewhere time made a noise, as if it were a net caught on a nail.

The witch hissed. Her beard blazed, flames falling into the fjord skin and not burning. "A Norn child against a woman who talks with bones?" she hissed. "I've learned entirely different knots." She rammed the staff onto the bone raft, and smoke with faces crept out of the cracks. Voices rose, rattling like old hinges. She called out things I didn't know, and some I did and never wanted to hear again.

Loki suddenly stood next to me. Of course he was standing next to me. He smelled of cider, lies, and a good joke he wouldn't tell anyone. "She doesn't want to kill you," he whispered. "She wants you to never have been. That's more sophisticated. And more cowardly." - "Will you help?" I asked. - "I hate her," he said, smiling so innocently that the fjord snorted. "But I hate you boring people more. Here." He pressed something into my hand. It was a small, crooked nail, cold like an unused lie. "What's this?" - "A bad ending," he said. "For good stories."

"Ulf!" I yelled. "Run! Just a breath!" He grinned crookedly, as if he knew how thin the breath was, and laid us so close to the bone raft that I could see the cracks where the witch had shoved her names. Thor jumped—they say gods glide. Thor jumps—and landed right among the red threads, which crackled like cobwebs on fire. He swung Mjölnir, and the raft groaned as if it were remembering its old life as a thing. The gulls screamed, scratched, pecked, and Svala shot them out of the sky as if she were counting flies in a tavern.

I also jumped because I only have two modes: too cautious and too late. The bone didn't give under my weight, which was irritating. The witch pointed the staff at me, and she shoved words into my ribs. I felt my name slip. Not from my head, from the world. "Skuld!" I cried. "One more thread!" - "Threads are expensive," she said, and I heard her smile. "But you always give discounts." A mere puff of air, and the pressure on my chest eased by a breath.

"Do it now," Loki whispered, nodding his chin at the staff. The staff was alive. It breathed in my direction. I held the crooked nail, which was a bad end, and didn't ram it into the witch—I rammed it into the staff, right where the runes began to go wrong. A sound, so high it wasn't sound anymore, ripped through my jaw and into my skull. The staff tore, not with splinters—it tore in time. A piece of the future fell out, looked offended, and vanished. The witch's beard flamed brighter, then darker, then stood in green light that didn't burn, only smelled.

"No," she said, and the "no" had three voices. "Yes," I said, and my "yes" had exactly one, but she was angry. Thor struck again, Mjölnir sang a line from a

song only mountains fully understand, and the raft cracked. Freydís hurled salt and words my tongue didn't know, and the undead stumbled as if they'd remembered their beds. Svala jumped beside me and slashed at the witch's hand with the short sword beneath the red threads. The hand took a step back, something hands rarely do.

A storm was rising, but not from the sky—beneath us, in our bones. The place suddenly smelled of ash and boar fur. Skuld pulled a thread taut above me, and I saw—in the blink of an eye—a whole hall of threads: thick, thin, some that were glowing, some that had twisted to death. Mine was rough. I hope he wasn't looking at me.

"Break," the witch gasped, and I realized she wasn't talking about me. She was talking about the place in the story where I'm standing. I struck again, not cleverly, not beautifully, just mostly. The nail twisted in the wood—or not wood—the stick gave way, flew up, and the witch's beard, the red one that was all she needed, burst into flames that were strangely white. She screamed, but it didn't sound like pain. It sounded like someone having their red pen taken away.

The raft began to crumble. The bones lost their will to hold together, and the tendons, which had congealed, burst. We jumped too—across, back, onto the boat. Ulf held us as if we were barrels in a river that doesn't like barrels. Thor gave us a farewell kick with Mjöltnir, out of courtesy, and the raft sank, as if it weren't sinking, but simply ceasing to exist. The seagulls fell into the water like stones no one wanted to throw. The red color in the fjord faded, then disappeared.

Steam lingered on the water, even though the wind had reason enough to do something. For a brief moment, a face loomed in the steam—not Hel, not Odin, not Loki. Skuld. She made no expression, because the future rarely makes expressions. She raised two fingers, barely visible: one for "yet," one for "not." Then she was Rand again.

We rowed home. The fjord behaved like an animal shaking itself and pretending it had never itched. In the village, the women stood, not behind the men, but where they wanted to stand. Children put their fingers in the corners of their mouths to avoid blowing their whistles. The earl acted as if he had organized it all.

It was warm in the hall because we decided it was warm. The mead didn't taste good, but it tasted right. Men said their names aloud, just to check if they

belonged to them again. The names came back, some stumbling, some with a pat on the back, but only one didn't. Torfi stood on the bench, looked around, and called out, "I'm..." - "That guy," half the village answered, and we laughed so hard that the rafters joined in. He bowed as if he'd written the role himself.

Jobst sat quietly, his horn unused beside him, holding Ilse's hand. "I saw the witch," he whispered, "so close that she tickled my beard." "You don't have a beard," said Ilse. "Then she lent me one," he grinned, and she kissed him so that the fjord fell silent.

Later—I don't remember when, in some places the night has no clock—I went outside, stepped over to the mead barrel we keep for guests, and flipped open the lid. Inside floated a hair. Red. Not just red. The red of something that burns for a long time before turning to ash. I fished it out, laid it over the barrel's edge, and it trembled a little, as if it wanted to say "yet" and "not." I didn't tuck it into my belt. I dropped it into the embers. It made a very faint sound, like a thread that has stopped taking itself seriously.

"She's not gone," Freydís said behind me, without question, without fear. "Nothing is gone," I said. "Not even if it never was."

In the morning, the fjord smelled of cold salt again, not of bad fate. The children played, again out of sync. The goat bleated rudely, without any Norns. Heimdall didn't come because project managers only come when lists need to be distributed. Odin was somewhere, Thor was somewhere, Loki was everywhere. Skuld was a rim in the air. I was me. Maybe a little stronger, maybe just more tired. I raised the cup and drank to the bad nail in my pocket that worked well, and to the staff that was no longer a staff, and to a woman whose fiery beard finally ran out, at least for today.

"To the return of the Redbeard Witch," I said, "and to her staying away for a change." The hall laughed. The wind cut against the edge of the roof and then pretended it had always been friendly. And somewhere far out in the haze, crows were gathering something that looked like ash that had forgotten its name. We drank, sharpened, argued, kissed, slept badly, and got up again. And as long as we did that, no one rewrote history without us noticing. Not even a woman who builds bone rafts and rips out threads. Not as long as the fjord still spits back our names when someone calls them from the shore.

Chapter 25 - War by Accident

We had set out to buy salt. An honest errand for a dishonest crew. The sky was tinny, the sea an old knife, and my mood a low cup. "Just bargaining," I said, "no fighting." Torfi nodded eagerly, which with him always means he already has an idea how to screw it up. Ulf checked the ropes, Freydís tightened the lacing on her bracers, Jobst searched his pockets for the smoking horn that Ilse had stolen from him along the way. Peace lay over us like a cloak that's too short.

The harbor of the small town was supposedly called Friðarvík. Peace Bay. Nice lie. Two tribes shared the jetty: the Greyskins to the north, the Redbands to the south – both as friendly as whetstones. We docked in the middle, as if we wanted to be hated equally. I went first, axe at my belt, hand open. "Salt, herring, a barrel of mead," I said. "And if you need songs, we'll take them for free." The merchant grinned like a knife. "Are you paying with coins or with promises?" - "With both," I said. "And with Torfi's face when he messes up again."

It didn't take an hour.

Torfi disappeared among the barrels, reappeared—and around his shoulders was a magnificent shawl, blue-silver, with an embroidered wolf's head. "Look! Shawl!" I froze. Everyone else did too. Even the wind held its breath for a moment. The merchant gasped for words. "That's the standard of the Greyskins! Sacred possession! You—" "I only borrowed it," Torfi said, obscenely cheerful. By then it was too late. From the gangplanks, men brandished spears, the Redbands bellowed, the Greyskins roared, and somewhere in the din clicked an invisible tongue that was all too familiar to me.

"Nice scarf," said a man next to me. Smooth, slender, with a smile you only see when you later regret it. Loki. Of course. "Who are you going to declare war on first? I've already told them both, just to make sure they're on time."

"I'm not saying anything today," I growled. "I'm buying salt." "You're buying yourself trouble," he said, tapping me on the shoulder in a friendly manner. "At least this is fresh."

The Greyskins stormed. The Redbands stormed. And somewhere in between we stood, with a man in a scarf and a shopping list. "Don't fight," I began – then the first stone flew, hit Freydís on her shield, she laughed, and that was the end of diplomacy. Ulf pushed me aside, Torfi threw up his scarf and shouted,

"Negotiation flag!", whereupon half the Greyskins shrieked as if he'd kissed their grandmother. The storage hut at the edge began to smoke. No one knew why. Probably a decision of fate.

"Retreat to the boat!" I yelled. We pushed through spears, shoves, and slurs. Red and gray mingled to create a color that looked like trouble. When we were almost through, one grabbed my collar. I spun, too fast, elbowed him, too hard. His helmet clanged, and he fell. Three others came. And somewhere deep, where the bark of my reason is thin, something shouted: Now.

There was no bang. No thunder. More like a click, like a lock springing open. The light narrowed. The sounds fell apart: metal here, breath there, the rhythm of boots pounding in the mud. I knew this place. The edge of my vision went black, the center bright. My heart drummed steadily like an ancient dragon at sea. I heard Freydís shout something, Ulf curse, Torfi giggle in panic. I did what I do when the click comes: I let go.

Berserker. The word has teeth. It's not a spell, more like a door without a handle. You go through it, or you stay in front of it and become small. I went through it.

The axe became light. The men heavy. I saw gaps. I saw paths. I saw where a shield wanted to sit and where a chin was too close to the handle. I went into it like a wave. One raised the blade – too late, the axe was already there, striking metal that sounded offended. The next stepped forward – wrong leg, wrong angle, my body knew the words its body didn't want to read. I turned, kicked, lifted, pushed. Everything worked, not beautifully, not politely, but reliably. Armor clanged, shields groaned, men fell. I didn't count.

"Hallgrim!" someone shouted. I heard it as if it were coming through thick snow. "Hallgrim! Not everything!" I laughed. I don't know why. Maybe because laughter is the last reliable weapon. "Out of my way!" I yelled. And they left. Not willingly.

I knew what I'd look like when that thing grabbed me: the veins in my neck, the whites of my eyes narrowed, the axe an argument. The Greyskins saw it too. The first jumped back, the second forgot that retreat has legs, the third raised his spear too high. I ducked, threw, the axe flew, struck wood, stayed put, my hand already had the knife, my arm knew where to go. It was as if another hand lived in my hand. I let it do its thing. Not for long. Long enough that the ground decided it wasn't just ground anymore.

"To one side!" Ulf roared, and his voice carried into the tunnel. Freydís was at my shoulder, shield to my face, blade at an angle, the good one who sings fast. Svala was a step behind, her arrow tskews three times, then stutters, and three men realized they'd bought too much valor today. Torfi staggered, his scarf flapping, he accidentally stepped on the Jarl of the Redbands' foot, the Jarl stumbled backward into the mead stand, the mead stand fell, and the crowd booed as if this were the greatest of offenses.

"You're destroying everyone!" Jobst shouted, suddenly beside me, both shocked and blissful. "Like a millstone!" - "Get out of here!" I gasped, without looking. "I'm busy." - "With war!" he exulted. "By mistake!"

The hut at the edge was now truly ablaze. Sparks danced as if they knew songs. The Greyskins and Redbands were shouting at each other about who had started it, and I didn't have a free hand to point at Torfi. More men rushed forward, because men like to run to where death is being dealt. I let them come and eventually realized: It was too easy. The axe rained down, the ground gave way, and in the distance, beyond the edge of my vision, stood something with a smile I hated.

"Loki!" I growled. "Stop pushing me!" "I'm not doing anything," he trilled. "I'm just beating the beat."

Then someone kicked me in the back. Not hard. Right. I stumbled two steps back into hell, the tunnel cracked, the air came in, my heart pounded. Freydís's hand grabbed my collar and pulled, hard. "Not everything!" she snarled. "Enough is enough!" - "Not yet," something inside me said. "Now!" she said, and sometimes she's more right about my bones than I am.

"Commander!" a Greyskin Herald suddenly shouted, raising a drum as if we were in a proper war. "To the line!" - "Commander!" shouted a Redband Herald, "they're forming up!" In the chaos, something ridiculous happened: Both sides lined up. Someone had decided I was the leader. A huge Redband lad stepped forward, knelt, and held out his standard to me (a different one than Torfi's scarf, but just as sacred). "Take it! Lead us!" - "I—" I got no further. The Greyskin Jarl stepped forward, anger on his face, hateful relief in his eyes. "There he is! The enemy leader!" And because words are cheap and swords expensive, everyone lunged forward again.

I took a breath. Once. Deeply. "Ulf, left flank. Freydís, on me. Svala, up onto the hut threshold—arrow to the banner bearers, but not fatal. Torfi—" "Yes?" - "Scarf away!" - "But—" - "Away!" He reluctantly threw the thing over a post,

where it was no longer visible in the smoke. The tunnel inside me remained, but it had doors. I let some of them close.

The next onslaught crashed against us like a wave of wood. The shield wall stood. My axe breathed. I no longer followed every lead, only the important ones. Men fell, others stood, fell again. Sounds piled up: armor on wood, wood on bone, bone on earth. I began to tap the beat. Not quickly. Surely. With each blow, the crowd grew thinner, more unpleasant, quieter. Courage melted from their faces like ice on warm iron. "Enough?" I asked the air, which smelled of mead and shavings.

Then Jobst stepped forward. Right through the middle. Ilse screamed his name, I cursed his ancestors until the fifth winter, but he ran, arms raised like a man awaiting a miracle. He hadn't smoked the resin – and yet I saw it in his eyes: that gentle, idiotic glory. "Stop!" he roared, in a voice that didn't match his body. "Stop, you turnips! I see pigeons!" Everyone stopped. Not because they believed him. Because someone had shouted "Stop" who didn't sound like blood.

"Pigeons?" gasped the Red-banded Jarl, who had blood on his forehead. "What pigeons?" Jobst pointed into the air, where, of course, there were none. "There. There. And there. Three. As many as... peace." He paused. It wasn't enough. "And gods." - "And what else?" asked a gray-furred man who seemed surprisingly open to esotericism. "Mead," said Jobst solemnly. And then men began to nod, as if they had finally heard an expert.

I swore I saw Loki wipe away a tear. Not out of emotion. Out of enjoyment of a good joke.

"Lay down your weapons!" I shouted, so loudly that the harbor stopped breathing. "Anyone who strikes now is striking against the gods. Three doves! Three gods! Three barrels of mead!" - "Which gods?" someone grumbled. "The right ones," I said. "Those watching today. And they want to see men drink, not men die stupidly." I stared first at the Greyskin Jarl, then at the Redband Jarl. "And if you want war, then tomorrow. With rules. With flags. With space. Today, Friðarvík owes its name."

Silence. Not peace. Caution. Then someone dropped their weapon. Another followed. A third acted as if they hadn't cared anyway. The shields lowered. The spears shortened. Breathing became something you could do again, without thinking about it.

"Treaty," said Ulf, still in the wall, his eyes alert. "Now. Otherwise, someone will start over before the pigeons land." The Jarl of Red Bands raised his jaw. "Peace? With this—" - "By mistake," Loki interjected pleasantly, "and out of politeness. He who refuses says no to heaven." He pointed upwards. No one looked. Everyone pretended.

The contract was a joke, like most contracts: half a page of words, three barrels of mead, an apology from Torfi so wooden you could build a boat out of it, and a promise that the standard would be returned clean. I had him fold the scarf himself and hand it to the Greyfur. "Sorry," he muttered. "It was cold around my neck." "Get a scarf that doesn't pray," the man growled, taking the cloth and looking as if he wanted to wear it to war tomorrow anyway—but not today.

As the sun hung askew over the pilings, the harbor looked like a failed market: overturned stalls, a sooty hut, men silently wiping their brows, women spreading insults like patches. I lowered the axe. The tunnel closed. The clicking inside grew quieter. I felt my arms, my knees, my years. I saw the marks on the ground—deep grooves, broken straps, splintered wood—and realized how close the day had come to becoming a mass grave.

"Minced meat," said Torfi next to me, reverently, as if it were a poem.

"Shut up," I said gently. "We're going home."

The Redbands nodded to us as if we'd saved their day. The Grayskins nodded as if they had too. Loki nodded twice, applauding for two worlds. Freydís flicked a nutshell at his forehead; he caught it, bowed, and was gone. Ulf put his hand on my back. "You were almost over it." - "I was over it," I said. "Freydís brought me back." - "I know," he murmured. "I heard it in my ribs."

Jobst stood on the jetty and looked up at the sky. "No pigeons," he said happily. "And still peace." Ilse took his arm. "You don't always have to see everything that isn't there," she said. "Sometimes it's enough if everyone pretends."

We pushed off. The harbor became smaller, the air clearer, my head clearer. Halfway there, I pulled the axe from my belt and laid it on the planks, as if it, too, needed a rest. "Accidental war," I said into the wind. "Not my favorite sport."

"You were good at it," said Freydís.

"That's the problem," I said.

The sea breathed. So did the boat. We were silent for a while, longer than a story. Then I raised my eyes, searched for the line between water and sky, and thought of Eirik, of Hel, of Skuld, of the horn, of the splinter, of all that trickles and yet eventually floods. Today we had pushed in the plug. Tomorrow someone would fiddle with it again.

"When we get home," I said, "we'll drink to the pigeons that weren't."

"And on the scarf," said Torfi.

"Especially the scarf," sighed Svala.

"And to you, Hallgrim," Ulf said quietly. "Because you came back."

I nodded without looking. The berserker in me lay down like a dog that knows who it belongs to again. Not defeated. Tamed. For today. The fjord accepted us as if we'd never wanted to buy anything but salt. And perhaps that was the truth of the day: You set out to fetch salt – and come home with a story that tastes of iron, yet isn't too bitter.

Behind us, in the harbor, two tribes negotiated the future as if it were a good knife: It can be shared, yet it belongs to no one. Before us lay the path we'd always walked: water, wind, wood, breath. I placed my hand on the axe. "Not tomorrow," I told it. "Not tomorrow."

Chapter 26 - Hallgrim against all

The morning smelled of cold ash and bad advice. I was sitting by the post, my cup empty, my head full of yesterday's residual tremors, when the goat banged its head against the door as if challenging the world. Ulf came in and gave me a look that said, "Say you're not starting again today." I was about to say that *I never begin* - then the wind pushed the curtain aside, and outside in the fjord lay sails like teeth in a giant mouth.

"Three... four... seven," murmured Svala on the roof, "and the two on the south bank aren't fishermen." Freydís was already in his boots, tying his bracers. Torfi put on the helmet that was always too big for him, looking both brave and offended at the same time. Jobst held his smoke horn in his hand like a child holds a sacred spoon; Ilse stood beside him with that look that turns men back to wood.

"Who?" I asked.

Svala began to read names like debts: "Pirates from the Gold Island. The traders from Miklagard with two mercenaries, whose morals are individually based. Two grey-skin boats from Friðarvik—apparently, peace has been restored there.*incorrectspelled*. And..." She paused. "...a giant on the North Ridge. The one with the helmet you 'borrowed'."

"Returned," I corrected.

"With a notch," said Ulf.

"As a reminder," I said.

The sails edged closer. From the trees on the slope came dots with legs—men who like to be early when the beatings are dealt. Shields spread out on the beach as if trying to stem the ebb. Someone blew a horn that had too much confidence in its own dignity. From the water, someone called: "Hallgrim Ragnarson! Bounty! Two chests of silver for whoever can still use your head!"

"Use it?" asked Torfi.

"To drink," said Freydís.

The Jarl entered the hall, pretending to have some idea. "Negotiate?" he asked hoarsely. I saw the line of sails, shields, and teeth. "You can do it," I said, "but speak quickly. They're slow to listen." I tucked the axe into my belt, resting my fingers on the blade. The fjord breathed harshly; we breathed faster.

And then—this is the moment where I make mistakes—I saw Jobst's horn. It lay there, innocent, filled with the Dutch resin that grins before you do. I picked it up, smelled it. It smelled of burnt earth, old honey, and the kind of mischief that makes men gods until they rise again. "Not today," Ilse said gently, as if placing a hand on a wound. "Stay sharp today, Hallgrim."

"That's exactly why," I murmured, "I'm a little off-color today." I drew a spark, inhaled. Warm, bitter, sweet. A thread in my head loosened. The hall took a step back. The air took on a texture. My heart sat up straight. "I... sense..." — "Nonsense," said Svala. "I sense... the gods," I said. "They're staring. And they're waiting for a sign."

Freydís rolled her eyes. "They're waiting for action."

"Deeds require a ritual," I declared, standing up, bigger in the head than I was. I grabbed flour, salt, and charcoal, rubbed them into my palms, and blew them over the fire. Sparks flew. "Odin, you old one-eyed man, I'm going to draw a circle here as sharp as my cat. Thor, Thundersack, I'm going to hack a cross into the threshold board so you can find the entrance. Loki—" "I'm already here," Loki said from behind me, smiling as if he owned the roof. "—keep your fingers still," I continued, "until I need them." I took the axe, struck the door hinge with the blunt side, three times, then I put the horn to work, and blew into it—no sound, just a tremulous breath that rippled the smoke. "There," I said, "ritual."

"That was..." Ulf began.

"...completely crazy," Svala finished.

"We're all going to die," Torfi stated soberly.

"Correct," said Freydís, "but not boring."

Outside, the first wave began to roll. Pirate boats cut diagonally into the bay; mercenaries rolled down the slope, looking as if they were wearing armor made of boiled bread. I stepped out the door. The air vibrated. I raised my axe. The resin hummed softly in my blood like a bee that knows too many gods.

"Men! Women! Goat!" I shouted. The goat bleated, sounding in agreement. "We're playing *Hallgrim against all* Rules: no rules. Exception: when I'm acting, don't laugh.

"Youseem?" asked Svala.

"I'm working," I said. "Look." I raised the jug, struck it against the post, sending coal dust tumbling down. The wind caught it, painted it across the courtyard, and in the air, faint but there: a crooked wreath of runes, like the one drawn by a child who thinks they can spell gods. "Hey," Loki said appreciatively, "that's almost..."

"Nice?" I asked.

"Irresponsible," he grinned. "And effective, as long as everyone believes in it."

"I believe," said Torfi devotedly.

"I think I'll believe it later," growled Ulf.

The first line of mercenaries seemed like a bad idea. Arrows whistled from Svala, Freydís struck the first man across his plan, Ulf rammed the gap open with his shield. I stepped forward, raised the axe over my shoulder, and *spoke*. Not words I'd learned; words that tasted of iron. "Halt," I said—and three men actually did stop, just long enough for Freydís to flatten them. I blinked. The resin grinned. "Again," Loki whispered. "Before they realize you're just roaring."

"Left hand!" I shouted, pointing at the embankment. "Rock!" A rock came loose, rolled as if by accident, taking three legs with it. "Right hand!" I pointed toward the fjord. "Wave!" A gust of wind shoved itself into a boat, turning it rudely sideways, grappling hooks grabbing at nothing. *Ha!*, cried Torfi reverently, *'hecan!*'"

"*Hebelieve it,*" Svala corrected, continuing to shoot, but I saw the corner of her mouth twitch.

The giant on the northern ridge now began to move, leisurely like a hill that has decided to go for a stroll. He wore the notched helmet. "Ragnarson!" he boomed, "Back your helmet!" — "Later," I cried, "war first!" — "*Warbecause ofHelmet!*" He took two steps, and the slope slid with him.

"Hallgrim," said Freydís calmly, "we need your *Work* over there."

I raised both arms, turning my palms as if closing an invisible door. "Thor," I cried, "give me thunder, but be sparing with the light, we don't want cracks in the roof!" — "He's not there," murmured Ulf. *Boom*. Far above, the sky rumbled as if someone had briefly shaken it awake. A thin, cool crack of thunder rolled across the ridge; the giant blinked, stumbled back exactly two steps—enough that the ground gave way beneath his feet. He didn't fall. He sat. And looked offended.

"That counts," I said contentedly.

"That counts," Loki confirmed, "as beginner's luck."

Pirates leaped from the fjord. One made it to me, a broad fellow with teeth like savage fish. "Wizard!" he spat. I smiled, lowered the axe, stepped forward, grabbed his wrist, twisted, and gave him the ground he demanded. "Magic enough?" I asked, and left him there.

Behind me, Jobst had finally blown his horn; his eyes became glassy like ice over cold mead. "Here they come," he whispered reverently, "*theInvisible.*" —

"Which one?" asked Ilse, her hand already on his earlobe. "*The Help*," he said, pointing with the widest gesture into the void. "A dozen men in white cloaks and with doves on their shoulders." He staggered out into the courtyard, amidst the shields and spears, raising his arms as if he had grown. "Friends!" he shouted to the attackers, "lay down, the gods have already *here!*"

The ridiculous happened: An entire wedge of mercenaries faltered. One pirate, obviously more superstitious than his beard allowed, looked up to the sky, looked at Jobst, looked at his own hand—and lowered the knife. "I... uh..." he said, stepping aside. Two more followed suit, because people like to be stupid together, or smart together. "*Do you see?*" Loki whispered in my ear. "Imprinting. A horde would rather believe in the invisible than in their own legs."

"More action," Freydís panted, "less philosophizing."

The second wave came. This time the merchant mercenaries in neat rows, scale armor, sword blades like new bills. I tore the rune wreath apart in the air with my hands, grabbed a shred of smoke, and threw it in their direction. It was smoke, of course. But it grew because *I wanted* that he grew — and perhaps because *all* wanted something big to stand between us and them. The rag became a wall, not tight, but bold. They held on—not because they had to, but because no one likes to stick a sword into something that looks as if it has *Teeth*.

"What are you doing?" asked Ulf, somewhere between admiration and fear.

"I pretend," I said honestly and noticed how something inside me *set*— no more dizziness, more like a saddle. I stood on it. I took the world by the edges and bent it a finger's width, no more. The finger was enough.

The giant started again. I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled a note that sounded more like a goat. The goat responded, jumped, and slammed into the giant's kneecap—of course, the giant didn't mind; it hurt her, and she bleated indignantly—but every story needs a distraction: Svala shot two arrows, *tack-tack*, right into the tendons below his knee. He bent. He put his hand down. Freydís darted forward, scratching the back of his hand, as if she simply wanted to remind the skin that it was thin. The giant pulled his hand back, and suddenly the whole guy was just *far away* and *impractical*.

"Thor!" I cried, "*now light!*" This time the thunder was faster, smaller, like a sneeze from the sky. Above the fjord, the topmost beam of the largest pirate boat came loose—just one beam, just one *Click*— the mast broke, went

crooked, tore sails and nerves. "Oops," Thor grumbled somewhere, audibly amused. "I'm still practicing quietly."

"Well practiced," Loki called out to him, stealing a mercenary's purse purely on principle.

It wasn't heroism; it was craftsmanship with humor. I cut, blocked, shouted words that were more absurd than ever. *firmer* I meant them. "Sand!" I cried, understanding by sand half a barrel of ash that Torfi threw into the wind; "Fog!" I cried, meaning the thin clouds of flour that drifted from the roofs; "Fire!" I shouted, and at the same moment Freydís threw a pitcher onto the wet boards—it only fizzled out, but *loud*. It all came together to create this music that makes opponents stumble in their thoughts. They stumbled.

"He takes them with words," marveled Svala.

"He takes her *timing*," corrected Ulf.

"He'll take it with luck," said Freydís, parrying two blows and taking one back, "and we'll keep the price low."

"Give me *alarge* Signs," Loki breathed. "Audiences love finales."

"Big?" I looked up at the sky, which was gray and moody. And I did something that wasn't at all wise: I climbed onto the post, raised the axe with both hands, let my head fall back, filled my lungs with smoke and resentment, and *sang*. Not a song our mothers had taught us. A deep, rough, wrong thing that the reverb beams knew, the fjord hummed along to, the resin in my head loved.

A Howling with words, a false psalm. I sang the names: "Odin! Thor! Freyja! Hel! Skuld! Jörmungandr! Fen—" "Not him!" Svala cut me off. I sang *despite it*, and at the third verse, snow fell. Not real snow; dirty, broad flakes, heavy as wet rags—they stuck to helmets, slipped into eyes, made steps *incorrect*. A man laughed hysterically, slipped, and fell on the man in front of him. Three others toppled over. The wall of smoke grinned. I grinned back.

And then, because every theater needs a knife, I jumped from the post, sat down, ran and did what the village pays me for, even if it pretends it doesn't: I went *pure*. The Berserker knocked again, more politely than this morning, and I let him at the door. Not in. At the door. The axe became light, the gaze narrowed, the sounds became layers that could be sorted. I sorted. I only cut where there was space; I only lifted where a shield wanted to breathe; I only

kicked where a knee was too proud. I heard my men: Svala—*tsk, tsk*— Freydis —*krrr*— Ulf —*Hm*— Torfi — “Help!” — Jobst — “Pigeons! So many!”*

Among the enemies, I saw the enemies of their enemies. A Miklagard mercenary pushed a pirate away for stepping in his line. A Redbänder slapped a Grayfur on the neck out of habit. Loki, with his fingertips, sowed little rumors: “He has your wages!” “He wants your share!” “He insulted your sister!” — I saw two captains suddenly *together* turned. “Yes,” breathed Loki, “self-service.”

The giant stood again, insulted but not resolute. “Helm,” he muttered, “now.” — “Next week!” I roared, leaping closer to him than was wise, laid my hand on his shin plate, and shouted *fracture*— which was nothing other than: “Svala!” — and an arrow stuck right where the leather was weakest. The giant yelped. It sounded like the creaking of an entire forest. He stepped back. That was enough.

Slowly, the enemies did what they always do when death and ridicule come knocking together: They lost interest. One by one, they retreated. The pirates withdrew their boats because the mast was insulted. The merchant mercenaries advanced in orderly steps. *backward* Silence crept down from the slopes like a cat pretending it was not to blame.

In the end, we stood in a courtyard that looked as if someone had cut the world and then poorly glued it back together. Smoke hung like a question. The snow dripped as if it were ashamed. I propped up the axe, only now realizing how much my arms were burning. The berserker in me lay down and immediately fell asleep.

“All of them?” Torfi asked, panting, looking around. “Aroundus?”

“Not all of them,” said Svala. “Enough.”

“Next time,” grumbled Ulf, “please work in shifts.”

Freydís placed her hand on the back of my neck, briefly and coolly. “You did well *did*, Hallgrim. Not only done *as if*.”

“I have *acted as if* So good that it was done,” I said, laughing because the resin inside me decided to wave again. “Maybe I’m a magician.”

“You’re a problem with axe,” she said lovingly.

Loki stepped out of the shadows and clapped slowly. "Fabulous. A man who *really* can do nothing — except make everyone believe he can *everything* — is the purest form of magic."

"I could order thunder," I said.

"You could read timing," he replied. "And you had luck. And friends. And a goat."

"And pigeons," trilled Jobst, who was held by Ilse's shoulders. "So many pigeons."

"No pigeons," sighed Ilse, "just men who have realized that if they die today, they will starve."

The giant on the ridge raised his helmet once more, showing me the notch as if it were a seal. "Ragnarson," he boomed, "I'll come back when you're sober." "Then stay away," I cried, "that rarely happens." He nodded, inscrutable, and disappeared behind the ridge where mountains sleep.

On the beach lay shields, spears, three overturned stands, and a feeling that we'd only postponed chores until tomorrow. The Jarl stepped out of the shadows, adjusted his belt, and said in his best official voice: "I have negotiated."

"With whom?" asked Ulf.

"With my courage," he said, nodding as if that were already a victory.

I sat down at the post, the same one I had started at in the morning, and let the axe slide against the wall. The goat pressed its skull against my knee as if it needed to check if I was still real. I raised the cup. "On *all*," I said. "To all those who came to get us and found we were already occupied."

"To Hallgrim," said Torfi reverently, "the magician."

"On Hallgrim," corrected Svala, "*thereally good* so acts."

"To Hallgrim," Freydís said quietly, "who came back."

The wind crept under the roof and settled beside us, as if it wanted to listen. Outside, the last boats were pushing into the bay, diminished, dogged, unconvinced. A piece of the mast crashed down somewhere, belatedly. Loki

was already gone, only his laughter lingered in a beam. Above the treetops, the sky was not friendly, but not final either.

I took another sip. The resin had settled, leaving only a gentle shimmer, like warmth over snow. "Magic," I murmured. "Perhaps it's just timing, courage, and very good theater."

"Don't forget the goat," said Ulf.

"The goat broke my knee," grumbled the goat.

We laughed, because laughter is the cheapest armor that lasts. And somewhere beyond the fjord, where the world begins, someone finished a list that read: "Hallgrim against all—open; Result: provisional." I raised the axe, ever so slightly, as if to greet it, not use it. "Come on," I said to the door. "But ring the bell. I have to cast first."

Chapter 27 - Trading with the Valkyries

The morning after the battle smelled of cold ashes, wet fur, and a promise no one had made. I sat at the post, axe against the wall, cup between my knees, and surveyed the hall as if it were an old boxer who'd been knocked down one too many times. The roof breathed, the beams groaned softly, and the court goat sniffed, searching for the remnant of a remnant. Freydís entered, helmet under her arm, her gaze too clear for a good day.

"Count's done," she said. "Nine gone, two injured, one goat down."

"The wrong one?" I asked, pointing at the beast next to the door.

"The impudently loud one." She raised her chin, a shadow passing over her forehead. "And Torfi."

"He lives the longest of all," I murmured.

"Not if Valkyries are faster." Svala pushed open the door behind her, a streak of frost in her hair, her bow over her shoulder. "I saw them. Three horses in the sky, manes like showers of sparks. They came down after the battle, Hallgrim. They brought men. Torfi was among them."

Jobst was already standing in the corner, holding his smoke horn like a fish begging for mercy. "I... uh... saw it too. Maybe. Or I saw clouds trying to behave."

"And the map?" I asked.

Freydís nodded curtly. "The Fire Island map was in his vest."

"Of course." I put the cup down, as if it were suddenly too heavy. "Then we'll get him back. Alive. With his bag." I stood up. My bones creaked as if they had an opinion. "The gods can sit on the post and applaud for this, or look away. I don't care."

"You want to negotiate with Valkyries?" Svala asked, as if I had suggested "extinguishing the sun."

"I want to explain to them that they're going to lose today." I picked up the axe. "Sometimes even Valhalla needs personnel changes."

Jobst raised his horn. "I know the way."

"You know the way to the horn," said Ilse, who had stood beside him like a robust truth.

"Our paths are related," he grinned, blowing a puff of smoke that curled briefly like a horse's mane.

We set off before the frost could even form its second thoughts: Freydís, Svala, Jobst, me—and the goat, because it can sneak through doors without being asked. The lake carried us, crunching, every step a small betrayal, and the forest behind it stood there like a pack of animals that had just decided to tolerate you. The fog hung low, damp and hungry, and every other sound sounded like a breath that wasn't ours.

"There," said Jobst, and I was in a mood to hate how confident he sounded. "To the rock."

The rock grew out of the ground like a tooth from an overgrown jaw. Gray, smooth, with streaks that looked like runes that had lost their spirit. I placed my hand against the stone. It was cold, like guilt. Jobst murmured, traced a circle with his fingertip, and nodded in satisfaction. "Gate up," he said. "And a window down."

"What does that mean?" asked Svala.

"If we're unlucky, both directions will hear us." He smiled. "Then we should speak nicely."

I was just about to rehearse a very unpleasant speech when the air vibrated. It wasn't the wind. It was the steady hooves that didn't really touch down. Three horses glided down as if they had asked the heavens to stop looking for a moment. Manes of light, hooves of sparks, the smell of sweat like cold metal balls. Brynhild, Göndul, and Skögul sat on their backs, so elegantly you hated the word.

"Humans," said Brynhild. Her voice was neither threatening nor friendly. Only final.

"We want one back," I said, all friendly and all threatening. "Torfi. He's carrying a map that belongs to me and legs that he still needs."

Göndul looked down at me as if she were assessing whether I was a worthy insult for the day. "What's gone, stays gone."

"Not today." I smiled. "Today is a bad day to try to contradict me."

Skögul rested his elbow on the pommel of his saddle. "You're the one who thinks he can command thunder. The one who builds walls of smoke. The one who strikes with words."

"I'm the one paying," I said. "Let's say... trade."

"With us?" Brynhild's eyebrow lifted, as if she were trying to skewer the word. "What do you have? Mead? Nonsense? A goat?"

The goat bleated, offended. I raised both hands, letting the axe hang. "A heroic deed. Not some village game. Something you can tell upstairs while the mead cools. Three days. You'll get a fresh story. I'll get my husband."

A brief exchange of glances passed between them, like a small, cold wind. Göndul cleared her throat, the horses pounded their matronly steps. "Three days," she repeated. "Bring us something that will fill Valhalla—or at least not empty it. If you fail, it stays. And perhaps you'll fill something yourself."

"Failure doesn't suit me," I said. "Only sweat suits me."

"Sweat suits you perfectly," Skögun said dryly. "Especially in the wrong places."

"Want to check?" I grinned, and Freydís discreetly stepped on my foot.

"Later," she breathed.

"I like men with tongues," said Brynhild, "as long as they know how to draw them in." Her horse backed away, its hooves leaving sparks like breadcrumbs. "Three days."

They rose again, not high, just out of range. I breathed differently. "Good," I said. "Then we hunt."

"We?" asked Svala.

"The bear at North Burrow," said Freydís. "The one with the scars and the stories."

"He drinks the honey from the traps and laughs while he does it," nodded Ulf – who had appeared shortly after us because he hates it when stories start without him.

"Then he'll laugh later today." I was just about to begin when the forest crackled. It wasn't normal. It was loud. It was slow. Two shadows emerged from the fog, as big as guilt and as fast as hunger. Golden eyes, as big as fists. Fur as black as collected nights.

"Sköll," whispered Jobst. "Hati."

The fog retreated, as if trying to make way. The wolves formed a semicircle, heads low, bodies tense, the world silent for a heartbeat. I raised the axe, flat, not threatening. "We are not for you," I said, not knowing if that was a plea or the stupidest statement of my life.

Sköll tilted his head, Hati puckered her lips. The goat chattered its teeth, something it had never done before. Svala had half-raised her bow, Freydís had the blade on her thigh. Somewhere in the branches, someone rustled, someone who likes to listen to good scenes. "Not me," Loki whispered from above. "I swear by... myself? Yes, that's fine."

"We don't need them," Freydís said, still watching the wolves. "We need Torfi."

Maybe it was the resin residue in my blood. Maybe the stupid gods staring. I stepped forward, raised both hands as if to draw on the air. "I'll negotiate," I said to the wolves. "You hunt the sun and the moon. We'll only hunt a bear today. Let's leave it at that: You don't eat the goat. We don't eat... drink the moon."

Svala stared at me as if I'd decided to live as a tree. Sköll took a step forward, so quietly that the snow apologized. Hati blinked. I placed my hand on the goat's neck. "Quiet. We're big today."

Then the unexpected happened: Both wolves retreated. Not far. Three steps. They sat down. They waited. As if we were the performance. Loki chuckled up in the bark. "They like theater," he whispered. "Give them one."

"Gladly," I murmured. "We have front-row seats."

We left them where they were and moved toward the north ravine. The snow fell deeper, the light thinned, and the smell of old fish and beeswax hung heavy over the tree trunks. The bear had his den here, you could see it: overturned beehives, uprooted tree roots, a fur hanger on a tree, from which brown hairs hung like bad memories.

"Plan?" asked Svala.

"Trap," said Freydís. "Two ropes, a sled, three men who can jump fast, and Jobst, who doesn't talk."

"I only speak when the invisible ones speak," Jobst promised, stepping into a pile of tracks that weren't old.

We tied, yoked, sought the wind, laid out honey as a bribe that even the gods would lick. I crawled beneath the firs, felt the snow in my boots, my fingers stiff, and my breath too warm. The wolves sat within sight, watching us with the stern patience of teachers who know every essay will be awful. Above the trees, the sky stood pale and miserable.

He came like the weather: not fast, not slow, just inexorable. The bear stirred the scent he himself had produced, lifted his thick snout, and growled a deep "pret" that scratched at his belly. He didn't waver. Not yet. He was as sober as hunger. He smelled the honey, smelled us, smelled the ropes, smelled the stupid ideas. His fur shone dully, his scars had names.

"Now," breathed Freydís.

I jumped. Ulf pulled. The sled shot out. Svala let the rope run, then slowed it, her palm burning. The bear growled in offense, as if someone had misquoted him from a poem. The sled wrapped itself around his hind legs, the ropes fell, not perfectly, but enough. The bear kicked, caught a loop that snapped around his front legs. He lifted, yanked, and fell to one knee. I was on it before my brain said "no."

The weight was sickening. A mountain that hears you breathe. I reached under the fur to my neck, found skin like leather, and pressed myself diagonally against my head, not heroically, just practically. It shook me like fleas. My back banged against bark, something in my shoulder blade sang a very bad verse. Freydís was on the left, the blade at the edge of her ear, where the blood is thinner. Svala cursed because the rope cut into the seam of his glove. Ulf pushed against it, his feet in the ground like two honest stakes.

"Jobst!" I yelled. "No resin! No singing! No—"

"I'll talk to him!" Jobst cried enthusiastically, kneeling in front of his snout. "Brother Bear! We don't mean you any harm! Just a little fame! Then honey and—"

The bear snapped at him, barely, its snout on his cap, its horn flying into the snow, the goat bleated reproachfully. I let go of the axe, took the hand that knew more than I liked today, and pushed the bear's lip to the side, so that its teeth wedged themselves against its own lip. It roared. To be fair, I had to admit that: we would have complained too.

"Now!" Freydís shouted, and Svala released the safety of the last loop. It snapped behind his shoulders, the bear fell to its side, rolled, growling that sound that turns snow to sand. I slipped, was in the dirt, back on, and pushed my head until it landed in the hollow between two tree roots. Ulf rammed the sled like a wedge. The wolves stood up.

That was the strange moment: Sköll raised his snout and howled—not loudly, not boastfully. A deep, short "ah" that was more like "so." Hati imitated him. The bear paused; just a breath. In that breath lay half our future. Then he fell, snoring, his body heavy and offended, and the wolves sat down again, as if they had only marked the pause.

"Does that count?" I gasped into the cold sky.

"Count," said a voice I now recognized. We turned our heads. Brynhild, Göndul, and Skögul had threaded themselves above the trees as if they had handholds in mid-air. Their horses steamed, their hooves making the light wobble briefly. "You're silly, human," Skögul added. "But you're persistent."

"I'm versatile," I snorted, trying to breathe properly again. "And I have a collection of flaws."

"We saw it," said Göndul, pushing a wisp of hair back under his helmet. "A bear, with no magic, almost no cunning. Just anger, ropes, and stubbornness. Not bad."

"And very entertaining," Brynhild admitted. Her gaze slid over me, slowly, judgingly. "Your heart beats like a crooked drummer. I like that."

"Come with us," I said, "we have mead."

"Mead is downstairs," said Skögul. "Valhalla has other things."

"You have stories too. And you're happy to bring new ones. We delivered one on time. Now pay." I placed my hand on the bear's rope as if it belonged to me. "Torfi. With a bag."

"The bag doesn't belong to him," said Göndul. "It belongs to the earth."

"She's mine," I said. "At least as long as I run faster than the rest."

Brynhild tilted her head, looking at me as if she suddenly had time. "You want to bargain. Good. You'll have it. But it won't be fresh. It's already tasted good."

"Costs what?" asked Freydís.

"From the view you get up above, when you perceive what lies below," said Brynhild, making it no more enigmatic than necessary. "You call it 'death.' We call it 'sight.' He's taken one. He'll be silent. For a while."

I nodded, even though something in my gut said no. "Give it to me. We'll deal with the noise later."

"And the 'bag'?" asked Göndul.

"We'll get them," chimed in a fourth voice I hadn't invited. Loki was sitting in a branch, his legs dangling, a smile you can't survive if you're stupid. "I'm so good at returning things that were never mine."

"Stay seated," I growled.

The air twitched. No light, no thunder, just a pressure, as if someone were pulling a thread from my ribcage. A shadow fell, then Torfi lay in the snow. Not like a sack. Like a man who'd fallen from a room too bright into one too dark. He breathed. Not a pretty sound. But mine. I knelt, turned him. His eyes were open and not here. I gently slapped him on the cheek with my palm, as if I were a polite echo commander. "Hey. Come back. Work."

His gaze searched, found, lost, found again. "Mead?" he whispered.

"That's my husband." I laughed hoarsely. "And the card?"

The goat stood behind Torfi, its mouth half-open, scraps of paper between its teeth. It chewed innocently. I stared at it, it stared back, and kept chewing as if this were its contribution to peace. "Spit it out," I said. It chewed. "Spit it out, or you'll become a prayer rug." It chewed faster, dropped a wet, half-spittled sheet. On it: stains, runes, edges that were no longer right angles. I picked it up, wiped it, looked. It was enough.

"You're disgustingly helpful," I said to the goat. She butted her head against my knee. We were even.

"Satisfied?" asked Brynhild.

"It would be a lie to say 'no.' I rarely lie if it benefits me." I looked up at her. "You ride beautifully. I like horses that know they're beautiful."

"Stop it," growled Freydís, who never growls and is therefore very good at it.

Brynhild sighed. "He's as charming as an axe handle." Her eyes flashed. "But sometimes even such things fit into good hands."

"You should see my bad ones," I said.

She laughed. Not friendly, but sincerely. "We'll see each other again, Hallgrim Ragnarson."

"I'd prefer it if you brought something back."

"Or if we get something," Skögun interjected.

"Then I might already be gone," I replied.

"Perhaps," nodded Göndul, and they turned the horses, lifted, and glided. The air closed behind them, as if closing a book they both love and hate.

We stood there with a sleeping bear, a pale Torfi, two watching wolves, a scrap of map, a contented goat, and a trickster in a tree. "Nobody's moving," I said, "I need to pretend for a moment that I planned for this to happen exactly like this."

"Didn't you?" asked Ulf.

"I never plan," I said. "I only threaten to plan until the world gives in."

Sköll and Hati stood up. For a moment, I thought this was the part where they'd claim their share. Instead, one after the other, they yawned so wide that the fog briefly disappeared, turned, trotted deeper into the forest, and were gone, as if someone had put them in another sentence. Loki leaped from the branch, landed next to me, and bowed in my direction and his own. "I knew you'd make me proud."

"I knew you'd tire me out." I nudged him with my shoulder. "Go away."

"All right," he said, winking at Torfi. "Welcome back, bard. Your songs are more expensive now."

Torfi blinked, as if he had to reconstruct the concept of "eyes." "I... saw... horses," he murmured. "With fire. And a hall where noise is pleasant."

"We'd rather make some noise for you," I said roughly. "But for now: be quiet. I'll carry you." I picked him up; he was lighter than he had been yesterday. People are like that when they've been gone for a short while. Ulf took the bear with a look that said we'd argue about it later. *who* put it away. Svala tucked the map under her leather apron, carefully, as if she were a stubborn bird. Freydís briefly placed her hand on the back of my neck. "You got it."

"I begged," I said, "with a knife in my hand."

"That's negotiation," she said. "Just honest."

We walked back through the forest, which admitted us as if we had paid the entrance fee. The air above the lake was still. The goat trotted between us, its chin smug, as if it had just performed a heroic deed of its own. I couldn't argue with it.

The village gasped when they saw us: Torfi on my shoulders, the bearskin in the sleigh, two wolves no one would have believed if they had stayed, and the feeling that we had torn something from the world that it actually wanted to keep. The Jarl stepped forward, acted as if he had expected all this, and nodded exactly once. "Good," he said. "Now we need mead."

"We need *much*" Mead," I corrected. "For the Valkyries, for the wolves, for the bear, for the map."

"And for you," said Freydís.

"Especially for me," I admitted.

The evening fell as evenings fall when they know they are respected: faster than usual and with less resistance. We sat by the fire as if it were ours and listened to Torfi slowly finding his words again. First small ones. Then larger ones. He sounded deeper. You get a different note when you've looked down from above. Svala laid the map on the table, dried the edges, looked for lines that were no longer there, and at least found directions. Ulf looked at the bear and rubbed the knee he still had. Jobst explained to the goat that invisible people do exist if you ask politely. Ilse watched him with that face that says: I love you, you idiot, but I love you. *despite it*.

I sat by the post, raised my cup, looked into the flames, and thought of Brynhild's gaze, Skölgul's laughter, Göndul's sternness, Sköll's yawns and Hati's braids in his fur, of Loki, who is never where you need him, but always where you deserve him. I thought of myself, who had lied twice today and not lied three times. I thought of my axe, leaning against the wall, pretending to be on break. I thought of Valhalla, somewhere laughing because we had sent it a story for free. And of how we had taken back one that shouldn't have been for free.

"To trade," I said quietly.

"To trade," said Freydís, who always listens when you don't speak.

"On Valkyries," murmured Torfi, "who ride too fast."

"To wolves that don't eat," said Svala, stroking the forehead of the goat that pretended to be a wolf.

"To you," said Ulf.

I drank. The mead was warm, tasted of yesterday and tomorrow, and that gut feeling that we'd offended the wrong gods and prayed to the right ones. The wind crept under the roof and settled down next to us, as if it didn't want to write stories today, just listen for a while. And somewhere very far above, where horses chewed stars, three women laughed—not maliciously, not kindly. Just the way you laugh when you briefly forget you're playing a role.

"Tomorrow," I said, "we'll do Fire Island."

"Tomorrow," said Svala, "I'll teach the goat how to fold cards."

"Tomorrow," said Freydís, "I will tell you what you *not*to Brynhild."

I grinned into the cup. "I'll tell her she looks better when she looks at me."

"Then I'll get you *again* Back," she threatened. "And without Valkyries."

Chapter 28 - The Last Raid

The night was the color of old iron, and the dream smelled of tree resin and damp fur. I stood beneath Yggdrasil, and the trunk vibrated like a stringed instrument played with gloves. Hel stood beside me, barefoot in the hoarfrost, half her face cool as a coin, the other half tired as an innkeeper after the fourth feast. "Last dance, Hallgrim," she said without moving her mouth. "Bring good shoes." I asked if one needed non-slip soles in the realm of the dead, and she laughed, and the tree tore a root from the earth as if trying to stand up. I awoke feeling as if someone had wrapped a rope around my chest and gently tugged on it.

The morning tasted of cold smoke and decision. I sat by the post, staring into the cup, which was so empty you could see your reflection if you wanted to—I didn't. Svala appeared first, with frost in her hair and that look that says, "Make it short, but do it right." Freydís followed, helmet at his belt, arms crossed, ready to count the teeth of my reason. Ulf pulled out a chair that had held better men. Jobst held the smoke horn with the reverence of a priest, Ilse her hand on his shoulder as an emergency brake. The goat stood behind them, breathing into my cup as if it were an oracle.

"We need supplies," Svala began.

"We need gold, not opinions," I said. "And a story to warm us when supplies run dry again. Hel danced with me."

"In your head," Freydís corrected.

"My head is the only hall that's always open." I stood up. "It will be one last raid. Not because we're old. Because the gods are staring. And if they're going to stare, they should pay an entrance fee."

The Jarl entered with the face of a man who would like to object, but has too few teeth. "Be careful, Hallgrim. The rumors from the south—"

"Rumors are just words that haven't yet met weapons." I pointed my chin toward the fjord. "Destination: Gold City on the coast. Harbor crowded, governor superstitious, guards fed up, but slow. Pirates as bouncers, mercenaries as decoration. We go in, we take, we go out."

"That simple?" asked Ulf.

"So simple it's complicated." I raised the axe. "The keel seam will hold as long as no one sneezes."

"Then don't sneeze today," murmured Svala.

We mended the boat, shoving pitch into cracks that looked like old sins, setting new pegs until the planks rang like promises. Ulf tested the rudder with the tenderness of a man who only loves wood that bounces back. Freydís tied runic knots into the ropes, small, unkind things. Svala sorted arrows as if they were arguments: short, long, wicked, very wicked. I hid Jobst's resin in the chest beneath the salt. Jobst looked at me as if I'd lent him his heart and demanded interest. "Just for the outward journey," I said. "On the way back, you can make the Invisibles sing again." He nodded and in the same second stole a small piece, because Jobst is the kind of man who raids the souvenir stand on the way to sanity. The goat got a rope around its neck, purely symbolically; it laughed at me.

We set sail in cold light. The wind was coming from behind, which was suspicious. A sea eagle dived over us and stayed as if it had been announced. The waves ran against the wind like men against decisions. A dead fish jumped—yes, jumped—out of the water and landed in my helmet, which I had lying next to me. "Omen," said Jobst reverently. "Breakfast," said the goat, and ate it.

The first night at sea was a quiet lie. We glided through fog that acted as if it had arrived especially for us. In the darkness, a fleet of shadows moved past us, masts like fingers, sails like big, bad thoughts. "Ghosts," whispered Torfi, who had become more black in tone since The Valkyries. "Fishermen without courage," corrected Svala, as a man from across the river first cursed and then blessed, as if the two were the same. We held our course. I wasn't asleep. I put my hand to the mast, as if listening to the heart of an animal that wanted to carry us somewhere.

On the third day, the city lay before us, perched on a spit of sand like a foot thrust too far into the fjord. Walls that did more than look pretty, towers that weren't ashamed, and a harbor full of boats that never leave when trouble calls. We docked in the shadow of an old pier that avoided water as if it had once pissed in its boots. Mist crept in from the river, the alleys narrow enough to support lies. "Quiet," I said, and Torfi giggled because that word always sounds funny coming from me.

We crept, which in armor looks like a slow insult. Two guards at the gate, shields on the walls, torches weary from their own soot. I raised my hand, Svala released two threads—*tsk, tsk* Two guards sat down as if they'd suddenly gotten hungry. We slipped through the gate, which pretended not to have seen us. The courtyard smelled of salt, oil, wet rope, and money. You can smell it. It smells like metal that's never been outside.

"Left," whispered Freydís. "Storage buildings. Right: clerks' chambers. Middle: screaming."

"Middle?" asked Ulf.

"If we're unlucky," she said, "alarm."

"What did you bring?" asked a voice that you'd rather drag through fire: smooth, friendly, useless. Loki leaned against a pillar that bore no weight, dressed like a dockworker wearing his good shirt over his bad shirt, and smiled as if he'd been invited. "I'll help."

"You never help," I said. "You arrange mishaps."

"Breakdowns are just unfriendly accidents that need to be handled politely." He snapped his fingers, very lightly. Somewhere in the city, a horn answered, bright, too bright, much too punctually. "Oops," he said. "I'm out of practice."

"To the boat!" someone shouted. "Fire on the ropes! Strangers! Strangers!"

"Okay," I said. "Plan B."

"There was a plan A?" asked Svala.

"Yes: not be seen."

"Plan B?" asked Ulf.

"Set fire to everything that doesn't belong to us. And then take what's left."

We ran. Freydís threw the first pitch jug, and the warehouse that would have taken us the most time gratefully chose to burn down. Smoke rose, the harbor shouted in three languages. Mercenaries arrived in orderly lines, which is very polite when you have arrows. Svala had arrows. I had an axe. Ulf had a door. He lifted it from the frame, turned it sideways, and three men learned that wood doesn't just burn, it strikes.

We rushed down the stairs to the treasure house, which was actually a cellar where gold was kept the way you keep a bad thought: tightly, but reluctantly. Two chests, seven sacks, three boxes that looked like nothing—and in the corner, something that looked like a joke: a horn. Not cattle, not aurochs. Huge. The walls scaly, as if a monster had once been polite. Golden rings, runes that moved when you weren't looking at them. "Not that," said Freydís. "We don't lug cursed furniture."

"We've been carrying curses ever since we could walk," I said, and reached out. It was heavy, like regret. "Ulf, help me."

"I'll help you later," said Ulf, helping me now. We hoisted the thing onto our shoulders, and the shoulder decided to get old today. Jobst reached for a sack that sounded like silver; the goat bit into a strand of dried fish and acted important.

We fought our way back into the courtyard, which by now looked as if ten bad decisions had danced across it. Soldiers in front of us, pirates behind us, smoke above us, Loki somewhere, smiling. "Right!" I yelled, and to the right was a small, narrow alley waiting to tempt people. We rushed in, ripping sacks, dropping two, picking up three, making noise that sounded like haste. Behind us, men shouted, thinking their prey was running with them, not from them.

At the quay, the air was filled with sparks; the ships' ropes moved as if they were trying to run away. Our dragon boat lay there like a dog crouching, knowing it's about to get loud. "Up!" Ulf shouted, jumped, and caught the horn

that would have killed me if I let go. Freydís helped me, Svala covered us with arrows that made people dream. Torfi stumbled, fell, and jumped up again, as if falling were his new talent. The goat stood on the bow and bleated at the harbor.

We pushed off. I grabbed the oar, Ulf pushed with the pole, the boat glided, and at the same moment, three pirate boats emerged from the bay of fog, slanting, hungry, their sails bulging like boastful throats. "Left!" shouted Svala. "Right!" shouted Freydís. "Straight ahead!" I shouted, because in a panic, I always want to go forward. The first boat cut us off, men with grappling hooks, their eyes wide with the thought of our gold (and our lives). I jerked the oar, the planks groaned, we brushed side to side, so close I could smell the captain's breath: old beer, new greed.

"Stay at the helm," said Ulf.

"Stay alive," I said back, jumped because I never do as they say, and landed on the enemy deck, where they were debating whether to hug me or kill me. I decided for them. The axe spoke, the mast cracked like a bone no one liked. The captain came with a saber, thinking too much of himself. I dodged, kicked, and pushed him over the railing. He fell into the water with the sound of a man who suddenly realizes he can't swim when he's going to die. Two of his men jumped after him—rescue as a reflex—and the boat, which had been big a moment ago, looked smaller.

"Over!" I yelled, and our men came like what they are: a handful with too much courage and too little time. Freydís led, Svala covered, Ulf came last and brought the horn, which jabbed us in the back like a drunken uncle. We cut ropes, lit torches, and threw barrels into the water, which immediately became things others stared at.

The second pirate boat came astern. I saw Loki sitting on the mast, retying a man's knot so that it came undone when he pulled. "You're a plague," I shouted up. "You're my audience," he called back. "Do something pretty."

"Thor!" I yelled into the gray sky because I couldn't help it. "Thunder! Not too much!" - "Heard it too late," it grumbled. Far above, the sky rumbled, and a single flash of lightning didn't strike the mast—it struck the water between the boats. The bang was a punch, the wave lifted us, the pirates made faces you wouldn't show your children. Our keel scraped against their side, I jumped, hooked the horn to the mainmast, the mast decided to try a new direction, and toppled half-finished.

"Back!" Ulf shouted. "Back to the boat, you ox!" I jumped, properly this time; my ribs have sounded like tin ever since. We pushed ourselves free. Flaming arrows hissed, half a sky full of uncertain decisions. Svala shot them down or tore them to pieces, Freydís cursed words that would make even gods blush. The goat was still standing at the bow, making sounds no better than a war horn.

And then we were out. Not safe, never safe, but out. Behind us burned a harbor that didn't deserve this, in front of us lay water that behaved as if it were indebted to us. Ulf tied the horn tight, as if it were a naughty son. Torfi sat and clung to life. Jobst—of course—pulled out his horn. Ilse looked at him, raised a mere eyebrow, and he put it away again. Sometimes a look is enough to establish a law.

The return trip was longer, because return journeys are always longer. The wind shifted, the sea eagle stayed, as if it had to witness us hatching mistakes. Night came without stars, as if the wolves had hunted them again. I sat at the helm, my back doing what backs do when they've said "yes" too many times. The horn lay beside me, cold, pulsing, as if it had a heart. I placed my hand on it, just briefly. Something vibrated. Not a song. More like a deep nod.

"What the hell did you bring us on board for?" asked Svala.

"It feels good," I said.

"You lie badly when you're tired," said Freydís.

"It was there. It wanted to come along."

"Like you," Ulf murmured. "You always want to come along when trouble calls."

The village looked at us the way villages look when their men return: with a strange mixture of relief, jealousy, and accounting. The Jarl stood there with the face of a man who had ordered good weather and received a storm. "And?" he asked awkwardly.

"A success," I said. "The city is burning, we're alive, half of what we wanted is now ours, and something we didn't want wants us."

"The horn," said Svala, staring at it as if it had just winked.

"Just a piece of giant skin with flaws," I said, my voice sounding unconvinced.

We brought the sacks into the hall and threw the crates onto the table, which once again swore it wouldn't be able to keep up with this much longer. The men counted, the women calculated, the children grabbed at anything shiny and got their fingers slapped. I lifted the horn, heavy and unkind, and placed it in the middle of the planks. "To us," I said, raising a cup. "To the last raid."

"Last?" asked Freydís.

"Until the next one calls," I said.

"That's not what you call 'last,'" Svala said.

"I like to call things wrong," I said. "Then they surprise me."

"The horn," Torfi said quietly. "Do you drink from it?"

"I'll drink from anything that doesn't bite me." I put the rim to my glass, and in that moment the room was silent, as if someone had thrown a blanket onto the world. The mead flowed, heavy, dark, tasting of honey that had lost someone. I swallowed. The sound that came from the horn wasn't a sound human throats make. Deep, as if a wheel were rolling over stone somewhere, far away, but just behind my forehead. A few men unconsciously placed their hands on the axe handle. Freydís's eyes narrowed, Svala blinked once and never again.

"Do you hear that?" asked Ulf.

"I hear we're not alone," I said.

"You hear that you don't know what you brought home," Svala murmured.

"I hear it laughing," said Jobst, secretly taking a sip from his little horn. Ilse slapped him on the fingers, too late.

"What does it say?" asked Freydís.

"It says," I stroked my thumb over the gold ring, which was warm as breath, "that it likes standing at large tables. And that it doesn't like being quiet."

"Then it suits us," said the Jarl with relief, because men like to keep things they don't understand as long as they shine.

The hall filled with noise, as it should. One person told of the mast toppling. One swore he'd seen the ghost fleet. One claimed I'd been on two boats at

once and won on both. I let it go. You can't rework stories before they're warmed up.

Later, when the smoke had cleared into the rafters and tongues grew tired, I sat alone by the post. The horn stood beside me, pretending it was harmless. I rested my forehead against it. "Last raid?" I whispered. "Or just the penultimate attempt to become sane?" The horn vibrated again, ever so slightly, like an animal in a dream. Outside, the roof creaked in the wind; somewhere a couple argued in a muffled voice; the goat stole a sleeping man's glove.

I looked into the embers, which always seem to have something to say if you just ask the right question. Hel had said "last dance," and I had understood "stealing the dance floor." Odin had been silent for days, which with him is an opinion. Loki was there, somewhere, smiling in some beam. Thor was in the east, drinking his courage. Skuld was writing along, slowly, like someone who takes time for mistakes.

I raised the cup again. "To the last raid," I said. "And to the next one who pretends it's the last." I drank. The sound in the horn ran through the hall like a cold wind collecting names, and I smiled at the silence that was wise enough not to ask me if I meant it. Tomorrow, someone will say we should stop. Tomorrow, someone will say we can't. Tomorrow, someone will say the gods have seen enough. And tomorrow, I'll say, "Then they'll just keep watching."

Night sat down beside me like an old dog. I placed my hand on the horn, and somewhere far away, something very large slowly turned around, as if it had sensed our gaze. Maybe it was the last raid. Maybe not. I like it when the gods are surprised.

Chapter 29 - The God Who Wasn't Invited

The smoke still hung in the hall like a promise no one wants to keep. I sat at the post, cup in hand, and delivered a speech that began as a heroic song and ended as an inventory. The men laughed at the wrong places, the women at the right ones, and the children pretended not to listen while devouring every word. In the middle stood the horn, our new pet, as big as a fool who pleases itself. It didn't shine; it waited. Even the dogs pretended to be analysts: they didn't growl, they observed. The goat stared at it, crookedly, as if calculating how much of the thing was edible.

"To the final raid," I said for the tenth time, and in that moment the mead tasted like metal that had heard too much. Svala stood at the edge, taking an inventory of her eyes: the wretched, the happy, the injured, the usual liars. Freydís leaned against the pillar, her hands covered in runic shimmer, ready to slay every curse with a better curse. Ulf sat too close to the horn, because Ulf protects everything that might later kill us. Jobst held his own small horn under the table, and Ilse had bound his wrists with her gaze.

As night settled over the rooftops, the sky began to shimmer, greenish, as if someone had soaked the northern lights in cold water. The wind brought not a whistle, but a rubbing—metal against metal, patience against patience. The dogs didn't howl: they were listening. I stepped outside the hall, the snow crunched, and a veil lay over the fjord, concealing nothing and announcing everything. "Omen," Jobst murmured behind me. "Get back inside, Omen," Freydís growled. Ulf stood by the door and said slowly, "I saw something out there that was bigger than Thor, but thinner. And the eyes... coins in the fire."

"That's the bill," I said. "It's coming up."

We kept watch on a night that refused to sleep. As the third hour fell, it fell silent, like a church in shame. Then the hall chimed briefly—a barely audible "clang," as if someone had touched the beam with a ring. The door didn't open. It was suddenly just open. And he stood there.

He was tall in the way shadows are tall: he filled corners instead of rooms. His coat looked like washed nightclothes hung upside down. His eyes—and I didn't like them—burned not warmly, but like anger that had cooled. He carried nothing in his hands, and that worried me. Men who carry nothing in their hands carry too much in their heads.

"Hallgrim Ragnarson," he said, speaking my name like a diagnosis. His voice wasn't loud, but it clung to the beams, and the beams held it. "I have come to take what is mine."

"Then we have a problem," I said. "Because everything here belongs to me until I lie down."

He stepped closer. A coldness accompanied him, not the honest kind that makes your cheeks red, the other kind that sits in your bones and determines your worth. "Listen," he said, as if I should be ashamed now for not having called him sooner. "You know me. And if not, your songs will know me."

A jolt went through the hall, as if someone had pulled an old rope. Balder's death flickered in a few eyes, the arrow, the mistletoe, the brother who was blind—and suddenly one saw that this man wasn't blind. Or rather, he was blind in the way gods are blind—exactly where it benefits them.

"I know stories," I said. "I don't believe them. And we don't like to invite people who can't drink."

He looked at the horn. The horn looked back at him. I swear: for a moment, the air between the two seemed to grow heavier, as if they were greeting each other. "This," he said almost tenderly, "is mine. It was given to me before I was abandoned. I take it back."

"It was given to us with difficulty," I replied, "heavily carried, with difficulty kept. Whoever wants to take it, carries it out with us. And after that, it stays where we are."

"You are dust with opinions," said Höðr mildly, and that hurt more than open insult.

Loki appeared, of course. He suddenly stood by the fireplace, where people are warmed and lies are refined, and clapped slowly once, as if bored. "Höðr," he crooned, "old friend, older enemy, forgotten brother in a bad drama. You see... after all. Is the fog good to you?"

Höðr didn't flinch. "You're the question that always comes too late."

"I'm the answer no one asked for," Loki grinned. "And I like your timing. You come when the barrels are half empty. Convenient: fewer witnesses."

"I don't need witnesses," said Höðr. "I need order."

He raised a hand. Nothing in the hall moved—but everything went wrong. The fire continued to burn, but the heat remained in the flames, as if it had learned to cry. I held the cup to my lips. The mead suddenly tasted like stagnant water that someone had looked askance at. Ulf raised the axe—and then lowered it again, not because he was suddenly pacifist, but because the wood became heavy, as if it were offended. It wasn't a curse that was visible; it was a displeasure that settled over everything.

"So," said Höðr, as if showing a child how to close a door. "I'll take what's mine."

Freydís stepped forward, her hands on the runes that hovered in the air as if they had a day off. "Not in this hall," she said. "Not in this lifetime."

"Woman with teeth," Höðr nodded approvingly, "you bite well. That doesn't change anything."

"It changes everything," I said. "Because you're missing the most important note: We're negotiating."

He blinked. It was a strange sight when a god blinks: the world briefly holds its breath. "Negotiate?"

"I bet," I said. "You want order, I want peace. I'll give you action, you give me peace. A hunt. Your animal. My ropes. If I catch it tonight, the horn stays here. If I don't, you take your horn and a third of everything that glitters."

"And your tongue," said Höðr.

"My tongue needs me," I said. "In return, you'll get Torfi's scarf."

"I don't have a scarf," Torfi mumbled.

"He means your pride," Svala explained.

Höðr looked at the door, as if his animal were already lying outside, waiting for us to be stupid. "He nibbles under the roots when the moon is big. He doesn't have a name. He's just a furry hunger."

"We know that," said Ulf.

"Hunt," I said. "Today. Without you pulling on my edges. Without you making the wood heavy for me. You watch and keep your mouth shut."

"And if I lie?" asked Höðr matter-of-factly.

"Then the world lies back," Freydís and Svala said simultaneously.

Loki smiled broadly. "I am the referee. No god lies in the presence of a better liar."

Höðr didn't think. He remembered. Past bets, past brothers, past mistakes. Then he nodded, so briefly that the snow outside didn't notice. "Good. The moon is half-focused. That's enough."

We went out into a night that was quick to give us reasons to turn back. The snow was dry, the forest silent and attentive. I took the rope, the net, two hooks I didn't like, and the gaze that tells me where reality is thin. Svala led the way, not because she's light, but because she knows the footstep sounds one is allowed to make. Freydís covered the flanks, Ulf held the far end of the world, Torfi carried the torch that wasn't really warming us. Jobst stayed in the village. Ilse too. Sometimes bravery is staying.

Höðr walked beside us, neither fast nor slow, as if he were on his way to a memory. Loki skipped from trunk to trunk, light as a lie one likes to tell. The goat—and this is no joke—trotted behind us as if she were about to teach the wolf a lesson.

We found the tracks where the forest suddenly decided to be a little more honest. Big paws that weren't playing. A line in the snow that wasn't a snake, but a remnant of the night. Svala knelt, ran her finger over it, and raised her hand to her nose. "Cold," she said. "And old. And yet here." I nodded. There are animals that pass through without being present.

We set the first trap like an offering: a rope diagonally across a depression, a net behind it, a ridge of forked branches in front. I didn't hold out any hope. Animals that nibble on roots don't just read tracks, they read intentions. We set the second trap deeper into the slope, where two spruce trees pinched the sky. Ulf cursed quietly once because the rope wouldn't listen. Freydís carved a sign into the wood that she never liked. I concentrated on not looking at Höðr, because one shouldn't feed gods—not with looks, not with respect.

The moon hung like half a tooth above the treetops when it happened. No crack. No tap that human ears like. A piece of darkness detached itself from the darkness and was suddenly a body. Not big, not small – right. Fur that drank in the light. Eyes that are better not compared to one's own mirror. He stood there, and the night found itself again.

"Beautiful," whispered Freydís, and there was nothing nice about the word.

"No name," I reminded myself.

He stepped, one step, and the trap didn't move. He stepped, a second step, and the net moved a little. He stopped. I heard my blood pounding in my ear, the torch breathing behind me. Svala pulled—not all the way. She's clever. I raised my hand, found the thread in the air, the one you can sometimes pull if

you're unlucky enough. Höðr stood beside me and did nothing. This was the worst kind of interference.

"Loki," I murmured.

"Hmm?" the Trickster hung upside down from a branch as if the world were his playground. "Please help me so early?"

"Don't help," I hissed. "Distract."

"With whom?"

I pointed back with my chin. The goat had sat down in the snow and was staring at the wolf, as serious as if she were about to read him a contract. "If she dies today," Svala warned, "you'll have one less woman who likes you."

"We'll solve it surgically," Loki promised, jumping, flicking, throwing—and suddenly a snowball rolled off the branch in the wrong place, falling just in front of the wolf's paw. It was ridiculous. It was enough. The wolf looked—just the corner of his eye, just half a breath—I was already in the rope, pulling, Ulf threw the hook, Svala let go of the spruce she had just discreetly stretched, and the net leaped like a fish that wants to live. Fur, strength, teeth—everything was suddenly under rope. It broke. The net sang, the hooks screamed, I hissed. Freydís stepped forward and placed the flat of the blade against his snout. "Calm," she said, softly, without begging. And he became—not calm. Less wild. A remnant of listening.

"Does it count?" I asked into the cold.

Höðr approached, examining the animal like a craftsman examining another's tools. "Counts," he said. And that was the first word I liked about him.

"Then lend a hand," Ulf growled, and because in our village, people take sentences seriously before considering deities, Höðr actually took action. We dragged the animal through the snow, the torch in front of us, our breath behind us, Loki in the trees, the moon behind us. Once, the wolf made a great attempt; the net held because Svala pulls on ropes more often than on fate.

In the village, the hall opened again by itself. The heat was still stinging, the mead still tasted like swamp. I threw the wolf onto the planks; the beams creaked as if they'd just heard a joke. Höðr looked down at the animal and then at me. His eyes were coins in the ice.

"I acknowledge," he said. "Bet lost. The horn remains. Your drinks regain their taste. Your fires once more deliver what they promise. Your weapons no longer spite you."

"And you?" I asked.

"I leave as I came," he said, and it didn't sound like consolation. "But you will see me again, Hallgrim Ragnarson. When the snow is red and the sky is black. When your horn plays a note that reminds you of your last word."

"I like having last words," I said. "I practice them in my sleep."

"Then sleep closer," he said, and the door was closed again without ever having been opened.

The heat crept out of the fire immediately, as if it had only been held back out of defiance. The mead tasted again of something that could sing. Ulf raised the axe, tested its weight, and she felt like the friend she is again. Freydís stroked the wolf's forehead with the handle, and the animal blinked, as if realizing it had just walked into a story. Svala came to me and placed two fingers on my temple. "You didn't defeat him," she said.

"I misplaced it," I said. "How bad of a mood."

"He'll be back."

"Everything that has style comes back." I sat down, my legs suddenly made of wood. Loki stepped to the horn, put his ear to the rim as if listening to a confession. "It's whispering," he said.

"What?" asked Ulf.

"Names," he said. "Some I know, some I don't. Some I've given, some I'd like to delete." He looked at me. "Yours has gotten louder."

"I'll drink to make him quieter," I said, raising my cup and toasting the false calm. "To the god who wasn't invited. May he always ring."

The hall breathed again. Someone started singing, off-key, but with a heart that wasn't ashamed. Torfi began hesitantly, his voice a notch higher; it suited her. The children climbed onto the wolf, who endured it with the resigned dignity of a teacher. The goat tried to eat the net. Ilse allowed Jobst a single puff to fall

asleep before he started rhyming verses about invisible gods. The Jarl acted as if he had organized it all, which is fine: everyone needs a hobby.

Later, as the smoke wrote the stories into the beams, the beams answered again, and the mead decided to be a friend today, I sat by the post as always. The horn stood there, calm, yet it seemed to harbor a deep, very ancient impatience, like old warriors who listen only to be allowed to fight faster. I placed my hand on the gold band. Warm. Not friendly. I thought of Höðr's eyes, of the coins in the fire, of the mistletoe story, of brothers, of guilt that can't be properly put in a corner.

"We should invite fewer gods," I said into the embers, "and more beer."

"Both," Freydís said behind me. "But not at the same time."

"He'll be back," repeated Svala, who doesn't like to say the same thing and therefore means it twice.

"Me too," I said. "Until one of us gets tired."

The wind brushed past the door like a dog sniffing to see if it's allowed in. I raised the cup one last time and heard—perhaps my imagination, perhaps the horn, perhaps my head—a deep note that cut through the hall like a slow axe. It wasn't threatening. It was a memory. Outside, snow settled on the old tracks, clean, polite. The sky wasn't black, but it was rehearsing.

I drank and smiled, because I couldn't think of anything else that didn't taste like fear. Behind me, my people slept, in front of me stood my problem, above me, gods wrote at one end what they called "Destiny" and we called "Friday Night." And somewhere, just beside the warmth, stood a god who hadn't been invited, memorizing the way. I raised the axe a little, as if in greeting. One shouldn't let politeness die before it's one's turn.

Chapter 30 - In the Belly of the Sea Monster

The morning smelled of wet rope and boastful calm, and I said aloud what one should never say: "This time we're just sailing." Ulf grunted, as if he'd already heard the punchline. Svala glanced at the horizon, which lay as smooth as a knife that no one had ever used. Freydís checked the rope. Jobst blew smoke into the lee of the mainsail and announced that the gulls were in a good mood

today and would tell jokes. The goat was munching on a loose rope at that very moment, as if it had decided to chew on fate.

"Stop it," said Ulf, to the goat, to the sea, to the day. "Anything that comes loose today will fall on our heads."

I stood at the bow, the dragon's head grinning in the pale light, and for a handful of blows, the world pretended we were tourists: the lapping of the water against the planks, the men's breath, a rich, lazy wind that pushed more than tore. Torfi hummed the kind of song you murmur when no one has died yet. I raised the axe to my belt, tight enough to remember, loose enough not to be necessary.

The fog came as fogs come when they're up to something: not as a veil that pretends to be friendly, but as a mush that swallows you whole without chewing. It crept over the side of the ship and settled in our ears. The wind stayed there, acting innocent. Below us, deep, but not deep enough, something heavy fell against the keel, as if a giant finger were tapping. Ulf raised his gaze, not up, but down—the gaze of men who know where the stories really come from.

"Current is getting... strange," said Svala, kneeling, dipping her hand into the water, then raising it again. Drops trickled from her fingers as if they were too sluggish to believe in gravity. "Feels like... breathing."

"Mine?" asked Jobst, laughing too soon.

The boat vibrated at a frequency that needs no name. The planks responded. A long tug on the world, as if someone beneath us were pulling a rope through a ring. We held our course—and the course didn't hold us. The lines I draw in my head when I leave the fjord crumbled like clay in rain.

"Hallgrim," said Ulf, calm and uneasy at the same time.

"Yes."

"We're not going anywhere. Something's coming for us."

"Bring it back?" Torfi asked hopefully.

"No," said Freydís. "Out."

It wasn't a sudden emergence. No movie trick. The sea rose—not as a wave; as a swell. The world's skin developed a bump too large to be healthy. The water stepped aside, politely, in panic. And then before us lay a back that wasn't a back, a length that didn't end, scales that didn't glitter but ate light, and between them scars that looked like maps from ancient times. It raised its head, if you can call it that, and its mouth was so wide it swallowed the sky, and so still that the sky left voluntarily.

“Jörmungand,” said Svala, as if reading a verdict.

“The World Serpent,” whispered Torfi, and his voice sounded as if it wasn’t big enough.

Jobst started to explain why waves sing – then his pipe fell from his hand.

"Row hard!" Ulf shouted, out of principle, and the rudder said: I'm doing what I can, but today is the day of the big fight. Water pulled us forward. Not whirlpools—intentional. I felt the air getting lighter, not because we were rising, but because something huge was sucking all our courage out of the room.

"Thor!" I yelled into the fog, because I never learn. "If you're around—"

"He's drinking in the east," Freydís growled. "We're alone."

The mouth didn't close, it only changed the mind. We were the tiny, wooden thing between two intentions that learn no consideration. The dragon head of our boat gazed into the darkness as if it had a sense of humor. I didn't. I breathed once, hard, so I'd have something to regret later. Then the boat was in shadow, the planks cracked—not bucking, but insulted—the men screamed, as men scream when they realize the world has bigger teeth, and the rest was sound.

It wasn't dark. Not right. A greenish, dim glow shimmered through flesh that knew too much: walls that weren't walls, a vast, pulsating hall where every sound echoed too much. The floor – soft, yielding, chewy. It smelled of salt, blood, eternity, and a bad joke. We slipped, the boat creaked, the keel seam whined like a child refusing to go to bed.

“Are you all right?” I asked into the false silence that comes after the first scream.

Voices, nods, curses. The goat bleated happily, as if it had been waiting for this very excursion, chewing on something that had once been a fish and was now more theory than reality. Torfi quietly and politely vomited into his sleeve.

"Hold yourself," said Freydís, placing her hand on the back of his neck as if that were the civilized way to deal with disgust.

"Where are we?" asked Ulf, too polite to say "why."

"In the belly of history," I answered, then took a cautious step, and the thing beneath my foot gave way like wet bread dough.

The glow came from organs you don't want to see: large, semi-transparent sacks, inside which something glittered, as if stars had been misaligned; folds in which salt lay like sugar on bad pastries; grooves that ran in one direction—not ours. Among all this lay what others had lost: a broken mast, still clinging to sails that looked like skin; a half-rotted hull of a small boat; two skeletons, entangled in each other as if they had mistaken death; coins that didn't like light; a pirate who, amazingly, was still holding a bottle, though he no longer held on to who he was.

"At least he has style," I murmured, taking the bottle from his hand. It smelled of oil. I let it go. I'm not completely stupid.

"I'll talk to him," said Jobst, leaning over a wrinkle that looked alive yet tired. "Great friend, spit us out. We're not easy to digest. We're full of mistakes."

The fold responded by contracting and sending a glittering spray in our direction. It burned wherever it landed. Ulf cursed, Svala jumped back, Freydís yanked Torfi up, and I slipped, catching myself on the edge of someone else's rib.

"Notwith the talk," growled Freydís. "He has no ears, only hunger."

"Jörmungand listens," murmured Svala, "but not to voices."

"Then what?" I asked.

"To stories," said Torfi, wiping his mouth and sounding like he knew what he was talking about. "To big, stupid gestures. To thunder. To endings."

"We can do that," I said. "But not all at once."

The first few minutes – or hours, it's the same when you're standing in the belly of a world serpent – were just organizing. Ulf checked whether our boat wanted to stay. It wanted to, even if it was insulted. Freydís was testing how much the walls hated us. A lot. Svala shot an arrow into a crease, just to see if the world would react. It reacted by remaining silent. The goat found something that looked like half-digested seaweed and decided that it *her* Seaweed was.

Then we almost stumbled over two men who looked like someone had forgotten to turn them off. They were sitting in a drier gully, which was probably only dry because the snake was busy elsewhere. Their skin was the color of old apples, their eyes the round, astonished look of people who've stared at the wrong question for too long.

"How long?" I asked.

"Days," said one, "or songs." He had the voice of a man who, somewhere in a city, had enjoyed blessing ships before ships blessed him. "We ate seaweed. You can... you can chew it if you forget your tongue." The other nodded and held a comb in his hand. He combed the air. It calmed him.

"We'll get you out," said Freydís.

"You can't get out," said the first one kindly. "Unless you have stomach cramps."

"Then we'll give you a stomach ache," I said.

Ulf looked at me the way he looks at me when I think out loud. "Options?"

I raised three fingers. "One: We climb into the throat and let ourselves be regurgitated."

"Too much is killing us along the way," said Svala. "Teeth, wreaths, false will."

"Two: Cut open the belly."

"We're drowning," said Ulf. "And I can't swim as fast as I can curse."

"Three: We make him cough. Or sneeze. Or... something big." I looked around. "We've got flammables. Oil. Pitch from the hull. Wood that's not having a good day. Mead."

"Not ours," Torfi protested weakly.

"Especially ours," I said. "Gods love victims that hurt. World serpents probably do too."

We collect, scrape, tear: resin from the broken mast, oily rags from the deck of the swallowed boat, the remnants of pitch from our bilge, which was nothing but sin. I left the pirates his bottle, but not the oil inside. We built a pile on the softer ground, where the light was greener—perhaps there was something underneath that knew pain. Freydís drew runes in the air that I didn't understand and drew the one I always understand: *More*.

"Light it," said Svala.

"Not yet," I said. "First, the air in here has to... yes. Exactly. That."

The air grew thicker, not because it was increasing; because it wanted to decrease. Jörmungand pulled, breathing, somewhere far, far beyond our height. I waited for the pull, counted to three in my head, something I never do, did it this time, and nodded. Ulf held the spark, Freydís the torch, Torfi muttered something about songs you only sing once, Jobst threw the first oily rag, the goat belched.

It burned differently. Not a healthy, good fire. A damp, poisonous, offended burn that quickly grew too large. It reached into the crease we hoped it would grasp, and the crease jerked. A tough, circular, unwilling contraction began. Someone—not us—made a noise that, in my childhood, occurred when someone protested after the third bowl of porridge. The world lifted. Not much. Just enough to overturn everything that was bad. The men clung, the boat slid, the pile crackled and suddenly found joy in itself.

The snake was cramping. I felt it in my knees. The ground was rippling, not above *below*, and we were surfing something you shouldn't be surfing. Gastric juice sprayed in arcs that looked like gods had spilled lye. I yelled, not cleverly, just loudly, and held the mast fragment that clung to us as if it were its last remaining limb. The pirate slumped and said nothing. The two rescued men didn't scream—they'd probably already exhausted the screaming.

"More!" I roared. Freydís threw another rag, Ulf hit with the oar as if one could beat a snake from the inside, Svala pushed the burning bundle closer to a pulsating thing I won't name. The sound that ran through the chamber was the color of metal. Not sound—a command. And then there was that jerk that said:

Now or never. I yanked on the rope attached to the boat, the men jumped, the goat jumped, the rest jumped into our curse, and the snake did what everyone does when their gut decides: It *threw*.

We were not spat out. We were *laughed at*— that's how it felt. A fountain that swept us away, a foaming, acrid blast of breath that carried us through a tunnel that was too long, and then there was air. Cold air, real air, and a sky that acted as if it had never been any different. We hit the water, the boat creaked in a key I now know in my bones, and we drifted. Smoke billowed from cracks that smoke should never come from. A few boards were offended and wanted to go home. The men hung like wet laundry, the goat stood at the bow, looking very content.

"Count," I gasped, and counted along because I don't trust anyone, least of all luck.

Everyone was there. Even the two from the belly. One was crying, silently. The other was combing the water running aboard as if it were the meaning of his life. I put a hand on his shoulder. "Later," I said. "Let's comb the sky."

Ulf sank down next to the rudder. "I hate the sea," he said, "when it talks back."

"I love it," said Freydís, "when it doesn't eat us."

Svala stared into the fog, which, offended, dissolved. "He's still there," she said. "He'll always be there."

"Jörmungand," Torfi murmured, and his voice had the depth you get when someone has forgotten you. "He laughed."

"We will too," I said, "just later."

We did what one does: bail out water that doesn't want to pay; pull ropes that don't want to; stroke the keel seam so it survives the day. Jobst pulled on his resin, just a tug, and Ilse pretended she hadn't seen it, lest he defy us. The sun was somewhere, doing nothing. The sea eagle—was there one?—didn't fly. Everything was too busy to be done.

"You said never again," said Ulf after a long while in which we pretended we had something better to do than live.

"I say a lot," I replied. "Most of it isn't true. But I always mean it."

"So," said Svala, "never again into the belly of a monster."

"Never again," I confirmed. "Unless it's necessary."

The goat bleated in agreement, as if "necessary" were its middle name.

In the evening—or what remained of it—we drifted into a sky that remembered the color it had been in the morning. The boat stopped. We stopped. The two men from the queue ate bread that was more courage than dough. Torfi sang a note that was so long it became friendly. Freydís placed her hand on the back of my neck, just briefly. I placed my hand on the wood. It vibrated. Not from fear. From what comes after.

"To Jörmungand," I said quietly. "That he choked."

"And to us," said Svala.

"And to the goat," said Ulf.

"And to the pirate," murmured Jobst, who hadn't known him, "because he showed us how to hold a bottle."

We laughed. First briefly, then longer, then so loudly that the planks laughed along with us. And somewhere far out there, beneath us, or around us, something very large was rolling along, not thinking about us. Not today. Maybe tomorrow. That's the best you can hope for when you have stories and wood and an axe that doesn't solve everything, but explains a lot.

"When we get home," I said, "I'll tell them we got out through the throat."

"Lie, little one," said Freydís gently.

"Then I say we made him sneeze."

"That's true enough," Svala nodded.

I lay down against the post, which now smelled of salt and poison, closed my eyes, and saw again the tunnel, the wave, the sound that had passed through my stomach. "I told him," I mumbled, half asleep, half in the lie that makes it easier to breathe. "If you eat me, my friend, you'll get a stomach ache."

The sky breathed. So did the boat. The sea held its breath so it wouldn't lose us. And I slept, with one hand on the axe and the other on the plank, as if I were

holding onto two ideas: that we're too small—and that it's enough as long as we're loud enough.

Chapter 31 - Trial before the Althing

The morning we left for the Althing smelled of bad coffee, which we don't have here, and of decisions postponed until the doorbell rings. I sat at the post and sorted arguments by weight: "It wasn't me," "I was drunk," "It was Odin." Freydís fastened her bracers and looked at me as if she already knew that none of these reasons would last longer than a thin rope in a storm. Svala sharpened three arrows "in case words fail"—one of her most beautiful sayings, because it means that words fail immediately. Ulf checked the keel seam with the same eye he uses to check people: It can hold, but one shouldn't provoke it. Torfi muttered verses about justice that surprised even him. Jobst stuffed resin into every pocket that looked like it needed something wrong. The goat was given a silk ribbon around its neck because Svala believed that one should appear neat in court.

"You seem polite," Freydís said. "You keep your mouth shut. You don't insult anyone older than you."

"Then I can insult everyone," I said.

"He means the Lawspeaker," Ulf interjected. "And the Goden. And half of Iceland."

"I don't intentionally offend anyone," I said honestly, "it just happens to me when I breathe."

We set sail, the fjord pretended it knew nothing of us, and for an hour, you could believe the law was a hut on the other shore, where you could find a friendly fire. Then the wind shifted, a wave bumped the planks against my temper, and I remembered again why I prefer arguing with gods rather than water. Torfi hung over the railing, practicing humility. Jobst told the goat that the Althing was a great, clever machine that grinds justice until it becomes bread. The goat ate the knot in the silk ribbon.

"Leave that," said Svala, "that's your costume."

"What if they call me as a witness?" the goat bleated, looking at me as if he actually had a plan.

"Then lie like a human," I said. "Slower."

The journey took too long, because paths to justice are always longer than paths to injustice. When we finally stood by the bay that leads to the land of long words and even longer faces, Thingvellir lay before us like a hand: the crack in the ground, the black cliff, the wide field where more tents stood than sense. Plumes of smoke stretched in stripes across the sky, smells mingled – fried fish, smoked meat, mead, horse, goat hair, and the perfume of people who had come from far away to argue and make peace, if necessary both on the same day. A river cut through the meadow, silent, as if it wanted to listen, and there, where the land builds a stage, Lögberg waited: the law rock where men with good voices carve words into the air.

"At least it's pretty," said Freydís, and there was so much skepticism in her voice that you could have lulled her.

"Pretty is what stops when people talk," grumbled Ulf.

Stalls selling weapons where every second blade was "ancient" and every third handle "made of walrus bone"; shacks with amulets that helped "against curses" and certainly not against prizes; lawyers with pennants, gods with faces like the weather, bards with courage. And everywhere, handshakes that are never just handshakes. "Hallgrim Ragnarson," I heard on my left, "the one who insulted the harbor..." - "...and the Jarl..." - "...and the brewery..." - "...and my sister-in-law." I stopped, turned around, and smiled my most polite smile. "That thing about the brewery was cultural criticism," I said. "So was your sister-in-law."

We pitched our tent at the edge, between an oracle who promised "everything you don't want to know" for two copper pieces, and a man who swore on scales that were more honest than his beard. Svala was just lacing up my cloak when a scribe stood before us with a board bearing more lines than I wanted to read today. "Charges in the case of Hallgrim Ragnarson," he read, and his tone clearly said: I've digested things heavier than you.

He read. And read. And read. Robbery, looting, desecration (here he coughed and smiled thinly), blasphemy ("Name, please?" – "Several"), breach of peace, insulting the Lawspeaker (here I looked at Freydís; she tilted her head), unauthorized diversion of a procession ("Which one?" – "The one with the

cows"), and "inappropriate use of mead in public space." "That's not a crime," I said. "That's logistics."

"Furthermore," he continued, "unlawfully bringing a goat into court."

"She is a witness," said Svala.

The goat nodded as if it had just invented law.

The writer wrote "Witness (Goat)" and looked as if his day was saved.

Thingvellir filled with faces. I saw merchants who hated me because I hadn't robbed them—yet—priests who hated me because I knew gods who wouldn't invite them, widows who hated me because their husbands were stupid, and men who hated me because I was still breathing. But I also saw a few waving to me: people who love chaos as long as they're on the sidelines. Loki wasn't on the sidelines. He stood in the middle of the crowd, in a cloak that made him look like everyone else, and nodded to me as if we'd arranged to meet in a marketplace of coincidences.

"Do nothing," Freydís murmured. "Say little. Breathe quietly."

"You can't break him of that habit," said Ulf.

On the morning of the trial, the sky was clear, as if it had a guilty conscience. The Lawspeaker—an old Godi with a voice that could even raise the wind—climbed the rock and carried the law as one carries a song that is too heavy: in verses, without pause, as if memory were an axe. He spoke of land rights, of fines, of blood prices, of the feuds that feed themselves, and of the duty to hold one's tongue when others drink. I felt personally addressed and therefore didn't pay enough attention.

When my name was called, the ground briefly considered alternatives. I stepped forward, the hall of air full of eyes, my hands on the axe, which today could only be a decoration. The accusers lined up: the merchant with the brewery ("desecrated" – it had merely tipped over), the man from Friðarvík with the standard ("sacred" – Torfi stared at his boots), the widow whose husband had voluntarily left my party, a priest who thought I should keep quiet about gods I didn't understand well enough. It was getting crowded. I broadened my voice and realized that didn't help.

"Defendant," said the Godi, "you hear the points. What do you say?"

"No," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"To everything," I said.

The laughter came quickly and was not friendly. "One more word," demanded the godi.

"Maybe," I said.

"A third," he said.

"Odin," I said, and Freydís stepped on my foot. "I plead partially guilty in those cases where fate used me as a tool. I plead innocent in those cases where stupidity was the driving force—that belonged to others."

"Name the others," said the Godi.

I pointed in turn at the merchant ("poorly constructed barrel"), the man from Friðarvík ("bad locations for sacred cloths"), the widow (here I raised both hands: "Your husband had a brave neck"), and saved the priest for last. "And you," I said, "you have gods in your house who spend the night with me."

That wasn't a clever line. The priest took half a step forward, then a shadow fell over the crowd, and suddenly Loki was standing beside him, tenderly placing his finger on his lips. "Shh," he said. "Not here. Not like this."

"You," the priest hissed.

"Everyone," Loki grinned. "I'll be everyone if you're not paying attention."

The godi rapped his staff. "Quiet." He pointed to a beam beneath which the jurors sat—twelve men who looked as if they'd worked yesterday and intended to show as little of it as possible today. A farmer calculating with his hands. A warrior stroking his knee. A bard who was already drunk and therefore for justice. I liked them. I never liked them.

Witnesses were called. One swore he saw me ("myself!") set fire to the brewery. I asked him at what hour. He said "late," because "late" makes the evening grand. I said I had been there in another village and named five names who could confirm this, and two who were dead. The man gulped. Another claimed I had "insulted the order" at the Althing the previous year. I asked if

order had survived the insult. He didn't understand the question, and that earned me points with the people who mistake questions for knives.

In the middle of it all, the third witness was choking on a fishbone. It was no spectacle. Svala jumped forward, hit him hard on the back twice, the thing bounced, fell to the carpet, and rolled toward my boot. I politely kicked it under me. The man gasped, and the hall gasped with him. "See?" I said to the godi. "I'm saving lives."

"You're saving bones," Freydís murmured.

It grew louder. Laughter came from the back tent, creeping in waves across the field. I turned around: Jobst. Of course. He stood at the jury box as if it were a bar, holding his horn in the air and letting the smoke drift. The wind picked it up, carried it over the twelve men, who paused one after the other. The farmer began to smile, as if seeing a sun for the first time. The warrior stopped stroking his knee and caressed the air. The bard began to hum a song he didn't yet know. "Jobst," I said tonelessly. Ilse said nothing; she snatched the horn from his hand and threw it into the river. The river did what rivers do: It took it and acted as if it had never been there.

"Order," commanded the Godi, and order returned on shaky legs. Then the goat charged into the circle, the silk ribbon like a victor's wreath, its head held high, and its eyes full of mission. Before anyone could catch it, it jumped onto the low table where two clerics were spreading out parchments that looked like money with words written on them. The goat did what goats do when paper is present. And while two men shouted "No!" in five dialects, it devoured a thick, red paragraph that would probably have made my life more complicated.

"Witness," said Svala proudly.

"Witness eats evidence," said Ulf. "I love our legal system."

There was a row in the audience because a merchant suddenly realized that it wasn't me who had robbed him, but his brother, who was standing next to him, and decided to spontaneously become honest. Then he spontaneously decided to run. Three men held him down, four men beat him, five men held those who beat him, and everyone who wasn't me suddenly had a lot to do. Loki stood on the edge of the stage, rubbing his hands contentedly, and said, "Justice loves opportunity."

I raised my hand. "Godi," I cried, "we can write this down or we can finish celebrating. I don't intend to die. But if you want me to repent, then give me something worthwhile." I hate that word, repent. It tastes like water in mead barrels. But sometimes a crowd wants to see blood and will accept a good story instead.

The Godi looked at me. He was old, but not soft. His eyes were the color of river gravel, and I knew he didn't like me. I also knew he couldn't hate me: the law doesn't like it when it's cheap. He bent down with two others, whispering as if they were consulting a wound. Then he raised his staff.

"Hallgrim Ragnarson," he said, "the Althing recognizes that you solve one... problem by creating two. And that you speak when you should be silent, and remain silent when questioned. The accusation is not empty. Neither is the anger. But we have seen that when the law only takes, it becomes as dumb as a sack. Therefore: punishment of your choice."

A murmur ran across the meadow, the tents leaned forward. "Either," he continued, "you pay each plaintiff a barrel of mead within three months, from your own property, not from other people's cellars—"

"Ha," I said.

"—or you undertake a penitential journey. A task that satisfies the law and keeps the gods busy."

"I choose," I said, "of course—"

"He chooses adventure," said Svala, Freydís and Ulf in unison.

"I was just about to say 'Met,'" I mumbled.

"No, you didn't want to," said Freydís.

"Yes, I wanted to," I said, "but not out loud."

The Godi nodded, as if he'd expected just that. "Good. Then listen: The accursed valley of Svartmýri. You enter when the first snow falls. You set up camp and stay until the night that dwells there allows you to leave again. If you bring a sign that you were there and live, the law is satisfied. If you flee or die, so are we—in a different way."

"What sign?" I asked.

"One thing no one else brings," he said. "They say the ground there glows when it doesn't like you. They say the trees talk backward. They say a lot. Bring us what you can't say."

"A poem by Torfi?" suggested Ulf.

"I can be serious too," said Torfi, offended.

"You can sound serious," Svala corrected.

"I can be serious," he insisted.

"Then start today," said Freydís. "We need it."

The audience broke into clusters, as grapes break into people. The accusers cursed, but less angrily than before: punishments that reek of fate feel like victories that you didn't have to do anything about. Loki crept closer, placed his hand on my shoulder. "You made the right choice," he said. "Mead is finite. Stories are mold."

"Is that a compliment?" I asked.

"In my language, yes."

The Lawspeaker called other names, other arguments, and the day rolled on. I stood at the edge and looked toward where the land hardens, where moors become mirrors that dislike humans. Svartmýri. They say no one stays there longer than one night. They say you can hear your own footsteps behind you. They say a lot, and I didn't have a free hand to wipe half of it away.

In the evening, we sat by our tent, and the field glowed with the kind of light that makes everything flatter. Merchants counted, bards sang, priests prayed, a goat stole a piece of cheese from a godi, and the godi pretended it was a parable. Jobst crept along the river, searching for his sunken horn. Ilse didn't see him searching. Svala drew a map in the ground with a stick, showing: river, rift, moor, trees, night. Freydís pointed with her blade to where the path ends.

"Of course we'll go," said Svala.

"Of course," said Ulf.

"Of course," said Freydís.

"Of course," I said, although part of me would have liked to screw up a punishment alone and quietly.

Torfi sat down next to me, looking at his hands as if there were a song there that wanted to go. "Do you want me to write something," he asked quietly, "for afterward?"

"Write something for before," I said. "In case there's no after."

"You won't die," Freydís said. It didn't sound like a wish. It sounded like a command.

"I die all the time," I said. "Rarely properly."

Loki crouched at the edge of the fire, knees drawn up, throwing small, ugly thoughts into it. "The Vale doesn't like leaders," he said casually. "It doesn't like voices that are more than their words. It especially doesn't like men who think they can negotiate with Night. So please be yourself. That might offend it so much that it'll let you go."

"In other words," said Ulf, "be Hallgrim."

"I don't know anyone else," I said, and it was the most honest thing I had said today.

Night crept up Thingvellir, sat against the tent walls, listened to people wringing rags from old cloths, and let the sky count the stars. I didn't drink much. I didn't like the idea of a place watching me drink. I thought of the horn in our long hall, of Höðr's eyes, of the wolves in the misty forest, of Jörmungand's belly, of the laughter that penetrates half of you. I thought of a bog that eats people who walk safely.

"Tomorrow," said Svala, "we'll leave."

"Tomorrow," said Freydís, "you dress warmly."

"Tomorrow," said Ulf, "don't tell anyone that everything will be fine."

I nodded. Then I stood up, took a few steps away from the fire, and placed my hand on the air as if it were a door. The wind smelled of metal and old grass. From Lögberg, the Lawspeaker's voice sounded once more, quieter now, as if he were telling himself the end of a long sentence. I raised the axe slightly, in

greeting, not in threat. There are nights when you promise the land you'll make an effort. And I don't like to lie when it's listening.

"Svartmýri," I said into the distance. "If you take my breath away, take it slowly. I want to finish saying the sayings."

The vastness didn't answer. She had understood me. And that's sometimes worse than when she laughs.

Chapter 32 - Fire in the Fjord

The fjord lay like a knife in the throat of the land, dulled by the evening light, but still ready to cut. We came home like people pretending they had no hope. The mast creaked, the sail breathed shallowly, and the water had that smell of cold ash, as if the sky had smoked before us. I stood at the bow, the dragon's head in profile, and told myself nothing would burn today. Then a thin thread of smoke rose above the cliffs, heavier than the air and bolder than any confession.

"There is something," said Svala, and Svala never says "there is something" until it is already too late.

Freydís stroked the javelin with his thumb as if he were a dog needing orders. Ulf growled at the oar. Torfi hummed a song he couldn't finish. Jobst stood in the lee, fiddling with his resin as if it were a talisman against decisions. The goat chewed on the end of a rope, pretending it helped fate digest.

"Keep still," I murmured into the wood of the bow. "Just through and through." The wood didn't respond. Wood rarely lies.

The entrance to the fjord was narrower than my patience could muster. Before the teeth of rock lay water with no waves—just a trembling, as if someone was listening. Smoke rose from the side valley, thicker this time, orange at the edges. I wanted to say "turn off," but my tongue only knows that word from insults.

The first volley came from the left, where only birds usually live: flaming arrows, shot so accurately that I even felt a sense of respect for them for a moment. They hit the water, hissed, went out—and then it burned anyway. A thin film of oil, invisible to the naked eye, spread across the bay like a betrayed

promise. It caught fire, not quickly, not loudly—consistently. Flames tore small openings in the water and then spat them back up again. "Who in God's name..." Ulf began.

"None of the good ones," said Freydís.

There were three ships, black sails, the corners poorly sewn, two with fake dragon heads, one with a wolf's snout board that looked like a child had carved it out of anger. They lay sideways, blocked so cleverly it made me sick. On the middle one stood a man in a long coat, one eye closed, the other too wide open. He raised his hand as if directing the wind. "Seawolf," whispered Torfi, and the music in his mouth sounded as if it had no desire to come along.

"Oars hard, left!" Ulf shouted. We tilted, searching for the hole in the fire. There wasn't one. Another volley, this time at the planks. Two arrows set the afterdeck ablaze in that low, hateful glow. Jobst jumped down, stamped, blew, and stamped on—and anyone who's ever traveled with Jobst knows how much resin residue lives in his seams. A small spark chose family. It blazed as if it had been secretly training.

"Jobst!" Ilse yelled, ripping his coat off his body and beating the flames with it, as if fire were merely a bad idea. The smoke crept down our throats, tasting of pitch and fists. Svala shot back, three arrows, three men fell, not dramatically, just with conviction. The fjord warmed, the fire drew lines in the air that my head didn't like.

"Cauldron of fire," said Freydís. "Stored in the rocks, leaked out, ignited."

"Well prepared," growled Ulf, "ill-mannered."

"Whoever blocks our fjord blocks its future," I said, raising the axe and feeling my hand relish the decision. I saw at the edge of the fire a figure that shouldn't exist: tall, dark, shimmering, with a heat that wasn't of the world. The head was helmet-like, the eyes deep as cinders, and in the hand—yes, there was a sword that breathed like a furnace. It stood on a rock that had no name, grinning like an ember that had realized it had all the time in the world.

"Surtr," I said without a voice.

"What?" asked Svala.

"Nothing," I lied. "Just thunder in my eye."

The Sea Wolf signaled. His boat advanced, the others moved slightly, opening a gap aimed directly at our soft spot. I decided on the only thing I'm good at: chaos. "Right toward them," I shouted, "then left into the gap, then stay alive. If you don't make it, die brilliantly."

"Those are bad orders," said Ulf, "but at least they're clear."

We pulled the kite sharply, the flames licked at the side, the pitch wailed, and we sped toward the middle ship, so close I could smell the sea wolf: salt, metal, superimposed anger. His mouth twitched. He raised the axe. I jumped before my body had decided. The opponent's planks were harder than they looked. I rolled, stood, swung. A man came, I went into him, not beautifully, just thoroughly. Blood spurted and was dried by the air before it even had time to show.

"Captain!" someone yelled. I wasn't the one he meant. Freydís came over the railing, Svala breathing in the same breath, lance in hand, the tip burning—she'd held it in our own fire because Svala is clever and has no patience. Ulf rammed our boat against their side one more time to keep us from breaking away. The goat leaped onto the alien deck in a perfect, absurd arc, landed in the debris, and mounted a bale of canvas as if it were a throne. Two pirates stared at her, incomprehensibly disarmed.

"Throw them—" the Sea Wolf began, and there I had him. The axe across, not full, just so that his coat ripped and his balance had to work harder. He countered with a blow faster than his eyes suggested. I went down, felt the blade above me as wind, kicked him in the shin, and pressed the edge against his belt. He growled, stepped back, pushed away a man of his own, because real fighting is never polite. Behind me, someone screamed—not in pain, in surprise: A wave of fire had spread over the oil, a glowing tongue, and tore across the fjord. The wind carried it like a banner.

"Break through!" I yelled over my shoulder, "now!"

"Not yet," cried Freydís, who was dancing with three men, two of whom were already on the ground, desperate to talk. Svala leaped forward, the burning lance plunged into a barrel, which turned out to be tar. The tar said "why" and exploded, because "why" sometimes means "because." The bang was a sledgehammer to our eardrums, the flame rose like a scream, and everyone stopped for half a heartbeat, even those who never stop.

I used it because I'm only quick when things get too big: One step in, the axe briefly against the Sea Wolf's handguard, a push, a slide, his blade moved to the side, not far, not enough – and I whispered into his only eye: "Look away." Then I rammed his head. It wasn't a heroic blow. It was the head of a man who'd walked into doors too many times. It was enough. He staggered, I kicked the axe again, the edge found a place, his body negotiated, and then his breath was elsewhere.

"Captain!" someone howled, but the boat had no time to grieve. It was an engine that had just lost its propeller: creaking, jerking, searching. We took advantage of the search and jumped back. Ulf had found the gap I'd promised, and our boat slid into it, not fast, not slow—just so that the next crest of fire barely grazed us. A second ship came alongside, someone shouted orders that no one understood because the fjord had become a hall of noise.

I looked back at the cliffs. Surtr was still there. Or not. The rock was empty. Sparks danced in the smoke like small, dangerous gods. I heard thunder, laughed inwardly because I wasn't falling for it anymore—and then a hut on the shore shattered at the edge, enticed by some arrow, and a pirate's powder cache from the day before—the powder had a memory—exploded. The thunder was real, but human. I felt better for a moment because the mistake wasn't divine.

"Left!" shouted Svala. "Two are coming from behind!" Ulf turned the rudder as if he were holding the reins in the mouth of a stubborn horse. Freydís bandaged a wound as he ran, which Ulf hadn't yet noticed. Torfi stood at the mast, screaming a song that held us together like a poorly sewn boot—but sometimes that's enough.

The water burned wherever it wanted; in between, cold pockets where one could breathe. I threw barrels into the fire; they became rolls behind which one could die without being noticed. The goat—gods know why—had climbed a tower of crates on the pirate ship and stood there, legs wide apart, chin up, like a queen with bad advisors. A man climbed up to get it; it hit him with its head, and he fell into a barrel that was overstretched even without him.

"She's yours," gasped Svala beside me, arrow on the bow, "but she doesn't work for anyone."

"All my love," I gasped.

The fjord made a new sound—deep, rolling, as if something that wasn't laughing was laughing: A broad tongue of fire, fed by a drifting carpet of oil and pitch, laid too cleverly by one of the enemy, began to think for itself. It ran athwart us, not fast, but inexorably. The two blockade ships were positioned incorrectly, their own fire creeping into their rigging. One yelled, "Turn around!" and the water responded with a gurgling, "Too late."

"Go on!" I said. "That's not a request."

Ulf blinked the sweat from his eyes, pulled the rudder in a path that should have ripped the planks apart, and our boat obeyed for reasons I didn't want to know later. We scraped past a burning beam that kissed our side, finding it ugly, and then we were in the lane, which was short and wrong. Svala shot right, Freydís threw left, I ducked from a shower of sparks that looked as if Surtr himself had shaken his beard. A crest of flame slid over us, so close I could hear eyebrows crackle. Torfi sang higher because the heat thins voices.

Behind us, a mast gave way. The crack was the word "end" in wood. People jumped, some made it, some didn't. I didn't count. I had my hands full of life. The oil crackled, the pitch burbled, the fjord burned like a sermon. And then, so suddenly it offended me, there was cold water in front of us, just water, acting as if it had never been any different.

"Through," said Ulf, not believing it.

"Not yet," said Freydís, because Freydís never has good timing for hope.

To our right, the second blockade ship broke apart, not in beautiful pieces, but in ugly ones. Men screamed, wood sang its last song. To our left, someone docked who still wanted us, out of principle. I jumped to meet him, not out of courage, but out of habit. Two blows, a step, a kick, the man fell. I ripped the anchor line, let him slip, and the boat that was chasing us suddenly had an idea about draft. It jerked, stopped, tilted, and five men simultaneously thought of their mothers.

We drifted into the cold hole between two fires, and the wind, which was nothing before, decided to like us. It carried us away, out of hell, into something that smelled of night. I turned around once more. On the rock, I could have sworn I saw a black shadow raise its hand—not in greeting, but rather "later." Maybe it was just the flag that no one was holding anymore.

"Census," I called. Voices answered. Everyone there. Injuries to be paid. Ulf had a line of blood in his beard, ashamed. Freydís blew smoke from her hair. Svala checked her arrows as if counting sins. Torfi held on to the mast and smiled hysterically. Jobst stared into the fjord as if searching for his lost innocence. The goat was back with us, I still don't know how. In its mouth hung a leather pouch. It dropped it. It flopped onto the plank and cursed. I swear: The pouch cursed.

I picked it up. Inside was a raven. Not a beautiful one, not a noble one—a disheveled one, with eyes like freshly polished pebbles. It stared at me as if it already knew what I was about to say. "Well?" I asked.

"Idiot," he croaked. It didn't sound like a quote. It sounded like a diagnosis.

"A talking raven," said Ulf. "That's exactly what we were missing."

"We call it law," suggested Svala.

"We'll call him Later," said Freydís.

"We'll call him whatever he wants," I said, "or he'll fly the soul out of our boat."

The raven tilted his head. "Mead," he said hopefully.

"I need that for myself," I replied.

We moored on the inner beach, where the rocks form two hands, between which one likes to return home. Men from the village were already standing on the shore, women with buckets, children with eyes, the Jarl with the face of a man who hates that today he was right to be afraid. We pulled the boat up; it squeaked as if it wanted to retire. Freydís organized water, Svala put a line of men to the buckets, Ulf threw pitch onto pitch to make it stop being pitch. Night crept down from the cliffs, not fast, not slow, at the pace of people who want to see if you're alive.

"Who was that?" asked the Jarl.

"People with time," I said, "and oil."

"Message?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It is: We're burning too."

"And what do you answer?"

I looked at the fjord, which still glowed wickedly in some places. "That we're louder."

Later, by the fire, which finally only warmed us and no longer preached, we sat in a circle that looked as if the world had left us by mistake. The raven sat on a post, his head in his feathers, pretending to be asleep. Then he raised it, looked at the flames, and said, "Idiots." It wasn't entirely without affection. We laughed, because laughter is the cheapest cure.

"Was that just now... him?" Torfi asked quietly, as if afraid that the name might set us on fire again.

"Who?" asked Svala.

"Surtr."

I shrugged a shoulder that resisted. "I saw something. Or rather, I saw what I needed to avoid becoming small."

"You're not getting small," said Freydís. "You're getting broad where you shouldn't."

"That's love," I replied, and she snorted so loudly that I knew she meant it.

Ulf moved closer to the fire, holding his hands over it as if checking whether flames were safe to use today. "That wasn't an accident," he stated. "Someone set it. Someone who knows us."

"Someone who knows we're coming," said Svala.

"Someone who will learn that we are not *only*" Come," I grumbled. "We're staying."

Jobst, who rarely has two good ideas in a row, had one right now: "If they pour oil into the water, we'll dump sand off the cliffs. It eats fire if you throw it right."

"Sand doesn't eat anything," said Ulf.

"Our sand does," said Jobst. "I'll talk to him."

"Not again," Ilse begged.

The raven jerked its head, looked at me, and beat its wings twice as if counting. "Al-Thing," it croaked.

"Yes," I said. "I know. We owe a debt to a valley that doesn't like us. But first, we'll quench our fjord." I raised my cup. The mead tasted again like honey that believes in enemies. "Here's to fire in the fjord," I said. "If so, then let it be on our side."

"Idiot," said the raven tenderly.

"Exactly," I said. "And let them burn their fingers on that."

The fire crackled, the stars did their work, the boats on the other shore were nothing but smoke in strangers' houses. In the cliffs, the stones once again spoke the language I understood. I leaned against the post, the axe beside me, and listened to my heart, which was still tinder. And I swore to myself—not to the gods, they have enough—to myself: Tomorrow we'll teach the water a new trick. And when Surtr smiles again, I'll smile back, because I know how to show my teeth.

Chapter 33 - The Last Cup

The fjord was still steaming like a bad joke no one had finished telling, and the village held its breath, as if afraid we'd steal the rest. I leaned against the post of the long hall, smelling pitch, smoke, wet dog, and the sober truth that wood endures more than people. Freydís pushed open the door as if she were counting the evening's ribs, Svala slipped through behind her, silent as a thought that hurts later. Ulf patted my shoulder, too hard for me to notice I was still there. The raven sat on my helmet like an insult with wings.

"Idiot," he said lovingly.

"You too," I murmured. "But don't fly away when things get serious."

"Ernst," he croaked, "is dying."

"Not today," I said, knowing that this was an invitation for the day to try.

Inside, the women had built the fire, as if they wanted to prove to the heavens that flames could also be friendly. The stones glistened with fat, mead vapor hung in the air like a promise. On the long table lay everything one could find:

dried fish, bread that had seen too much work, a ham that someone had saved before the water could teach it a lesson. And in the middle of it all, on a wooden platform that Ulf had built without admitting he had done it, stood it: the cup.

Not large, not magnificent. More like a heavy, honest jug made of dark wood, with a rim that had seen too many lips. Runes were carved into its sides, not artfully, just persistently. The ancients called it the Last One. Not because there's nothing after it. But because you're no longer lying when you drink from it. Or rather: you lie so well that even the gods nod.

The Jarl was already standing there, his hands behind his back, the face of a man who would rather have groomed five cows today than stood there. "Ragnarson," he said without anger, and that was worse than anger. "The time has come."

"I know." I stepped closer. The cup smelled of honey, tongue, blood, and snow. Old enough to have stories. Young enough to want another one.

"But eat first," Freydís ordered, and when Freydís orders something, you do it because you don't have time to figure out what will happen if you don't. We ate, we didn't drink. Our tongues grew heavy, our stomachs warm, our heads clear, because it had to. Svala spoke quietly to Torfi, who was staring at the edge of the table as if she might stare back at him. Ulf chewed as if this were a task that could kill you if you didn't do it carefully. Jobst acted harmless. That worried me.

As the first plate clattered to the side, the old woman came. Not one of us. One from the path. A gray wool coat, dirty at the edges, eyes like the frozen sea. She didn't say her name. She didn't need one. She looked at the cup, then at me, and I felt like a boy caught stealing a door.

"You drink," she said.

"I'm drinking," I said.

"You swear," she said.

"I swear," I said.

"You're lying," she said, and smiled so thin it was a pity.

"I lie better than most," I replied, and she nodded as if that were the only qualification that mattered today.

Svala fetched the jug from the shelf, both hands, not trembling. She filled the cup with the strongest brew we know in winter: honey that reclaims the summer sunshine, herbs that taste like medicine that likes to take revenge, and something unnamed. I smelled it. Resin. Not much. Enough to make the Unseen Ones prick up their ears.

"Just a breath," whispered Jobst, "so that the gods will listen when he speaks."

"Or laugh," said Ilse, holding him by the hood to prevent him from crawling closer to the fire.

The Jarl stepped forward, raised his hand, and the hall fell silent. "Hallgrim Ragnarson," he began, as if speaking to a child who had grown too big. "You made us rich. You almost killed us. You kept us alive. You burned us. You loved us as one loves wood: roughly, but faithfully. Today you drink the last one. Not because you're old. Not because you're finished. Because we want to hear you without the world interrupting."

I nodded, not out of respect, but out of gratitude that he wasn't crying.

"Speak," said Freydís, and when Freydís says "speak," it is like a weapon she is putting in your hand.

I placed my fingers on the cup. It was warm, like an animal barely moving. I didn't lift it. I spoke first because I know myself.

"I haven't learned anything," I said. "And I've seen everything. The coasts that roar when you kiss them. The cities that weep when you emptied them. Men who die as if they've practiced. Women who live as if they knew we're stupid. Gods who laugh when we need them. And monsters that belch when we're inside." Laughter, crooked, relieved. "I've drunk from barrels, from rivers, from hands, from puddles, from the air. But from this..." I looked at the cup. "...I've never drunk."

The raven puffed himself up and said, "Coward." I gave him a look only birds can survive. He stayed.

"I swear," I said quietly, "that I won't look away when we go under. I swear that I'll keep going when we fall. I swear that I'll lie when the truth would kill you and tell the truth when the lie would break you. I swear that I'll take every blow

meant for you and return two when my arms are free. I swear that I'll offend the gods again when they think they're more important to us than our bread." I raised my eyes. "And I swear that I'll wake up sober tomorrow. Maybe."

"Lie," grinned Freydís.

"Good," nodded the old woman.

I lifted the cup. It was heavy. It was right. I raised it to my lips, and then—the hall tilted.

Not physically. No. The fire remained steady, the beams remained beams. But the air changed color, as if the flames had lost their courage. Sounds grew quieter, as if someone had wrapped all the voices in felt. And behind the first row of faces stood a second. And a third. And a fourth. And suddenly there stood men who were no longer standing. Women who were already gone. Children who would never grow old. They weren't... there. But they were here.

I saw Gunnvar, who laughed when I broke his nose and then offered me a beer. I saw Ketill, who loved his shield so much he slept in it. I saw the brewer from Oseberg who almost killed me just because I called her yeast "rotten," and who later sang with us as if she were from my village. I saw Hilda, who taught me that you stitch a wound twice—once for the body, once for fear. I saw my brother, who never arrived. I saw my father, whom I never asked. I saw people I hated and wondered how much I liked them now that they no longer wanted anything.

I put down the cup. I needed to breathe. The hall was silent, not out of politeness, but out of anticipation.

"Drink," said the old woman. It didn't sound like an order. It sounded like the last piece of advice you'd ever receive.

I drank. The mead hit my tongue like a blow with good intentions. Honey that burned. Herbs that tell you who you are without asking. Resin that shows you where the wood cracks. Something cold that warms up. Something warm that stings. I took a second swig because good pain is worth tasting twice. And then someone spoke behind me whose voice I'll never forget.

"You're raising the wrong hand, boy."

I didn't turn around. Anyone who has Odin on their neck doesn't turn around. They put down their cup and let their neck decide.

"Later," I said.

"You never have time," he grumbled.

"I always have too much time," I said. "I just waste it louder than everyone else."

"I like you," he said, so dryly it hurt. "It would be a shame."

"For whom?" I asked, and the old woman smiled as if she had been expecting this conversation.

"Drink up," said Freydís. "Before you start arguing with the wind."

I raised the cup again, and there he was standing at the door: wet, pale, half-dead, all there. A man from another chapter, one I hadn't invited. The lost brother? No. We already had him. It was the Sea Wolf. Not quite. A version that had spit out the water. One eye open, the other empty, his skin shimmering with oil, his breath burning. He stood in the doorway like a bad omen, holding something I didn't want to see.

"He's burning," whispered Svala, and she didn't mean him. Outside. A light. A flickering, wandering one. Boats? Torches? The raven flapped its wings, jumped up, and cried, "Enemies!"

The sea wolf—or what was left of him—raised his hand and threw me an object. I caught it. A ring. Black, heavy, with a rune inside that I didn't want to read. "They're coming," he breathed. "Not for gold. Because of the horn." He fell. Not dramatically. Simply, like someone who knows the ground understands him better than people.

"Outside," said Ulf. "Now."

"Not yet," I said, and raised the cup one last time. I saw the rows that were there, and those that had been there before. I saw Freydís, her chin stubborn. Svala, her hands steady. Ulf, breathing like a man carrying a door within him. Torfi, whose songs today had no jokes. Jobst, who didn't look at the horn, out of sheer wise cowardice. The Jarl, who had grown old since we came home. And the old woman, nodding as if it had all been written long ago.

"I drink," I said, "to those who stayed, and to those who left, and to those who always leave and never arrive. I drink to the last cup, which is always only the second to last, because there will be another one tomorrow. I drink to our lies,

which save us when the truth stings us. I drink to the truth that cuts us open so we realize we still have blood. I drink to Odin, who never comes when called and is always there when we're not looking. I drink to Loki, who makes us all better liars, so we can recognize true words. I drink to Thor, so he forgets his hammer with the enemy today. I drink to the raven who insults me so I don't fall asleep. To you, you ugly bird."

"Idiot," said the raven, touched.

I raised the cup to my mouth, drank deeply, so deeply that it grew dark, and in the darkness I saw the moor waiting for us, and the horn that stands quietly on the table at home and is not at rest, and the flame that still seeks a friend in the fjord. I drank almost all of it, almost, and then I tipped the rest onto the ground, onto the old boards that have already drunk more than any man here. "For those who see us but aren't here," I said. "For those who breathe on our backs. For those we can't get rid of, even if we want to."

The drop hissed as if it had struck embers. Perhaps it had. The cup was empty. The hall exhaled. Outside, the wind beat against the wall, and one of the dogs howled, not beautifully, but honestly. The Jarl raised his staff. "So be it," he said. "The last one is drunk."

"Second to last," I corrected. "There'll be another one tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," said Freydís, "there will be blood."

"Tomorrow," said Svala, "there will be paths we don't yet know."

"Tomorrow," said Ulf, "there's work."

"Morning," said the raven, "idiots."

The door burst open. Not dramatically, just decisively. Cold, snow, sparks. A boy, wet to the bone, his breath like knives. "Boats," he gasped. "No sails that I recognize. No crest. No fear."

I put the cup down, very carefully, as if putting a child to sleep. Then I picked up the axe. It felt like an old friend to whom someone once again says, "Come on, another stupid adventure."

The old woman pulled up her hood. "That was good," she said, looking at the wet spot at my feet. "Someone heard that."

"Who?" I asked.

"Enough." She turned around, her footsteps making no sound, as if they had ceased to burden the world.

I went to the door. Outside, the fjord was once again a mouthful that had promised itself something. Lights moved on the water, not many, not a few—precise enough to know they could count correctly. On the rock, where the smoke had danced yesterday, stood a shadow. It raised its hand. Not in greeting. As a sign. As a check on a bill.

"The gods?" asked Torfi from behind me.

"All," I said. "And no one." I stepped outside, the snow bit, the raven hopped onto my shoulder, the village moved as if it were a body rising. Behind me, someone whispered "Ragnarson," as if it were a prayer. Maybe it was one. Maybe it was a threat. In the end, it's the same thing.

"Get the men," I said to Ulf. "Svala, count arrows. Freydís, wake the brave, and wake the cowards. I don't want anyone today who will regret sleeping tomorrow."

"And you?" Freydis asked.

I grinned so broadly it hurt. "I'm going to give the new neighbors some mead."

The wind carried away laughter that wasn't ours. The lights came closer. The ring in my hand was cold and alive. Behind the clouds, something large moved, something I didn't want to name. I raised the axe, paused, and for a heartbeat, the world was clean: snow, breath, wood, steel, friends. Then it started moving again.

"Here's to the last cup," I said again, this time to the fjord.

"Idiot," said the raven very gently.

"Yes," I said. "And now they're drinking from us."

Chapter 34 - How to Become a Legend

The fjord lay black as an open wound, only the snow at its edges shone in the flickering torchlight. The strangers' boats glided in silently, their hulls dark, their

oars rhythmic like a heartbeat that boded ill. The wind brought the smell of pitch and metal, and somewhere in the darkness a horn sounded, deep and strange, like a giant breathing underwater. I stood at the edge of the jetty, axe in hand, and thought: If this is my last evening, he's going to be loud.

Ulf came from behind and tossed me the helmet I hadn't worn since the second-to-last cup. "It still fits," he said. "Or your head has gotten smaller." I put it on, and the raven landed on it like a captain on his bridge. "Idiots," he croaked, and I knew he meant everyone—us, them, the gods.

Svala came with her bow, her face hard, her eyes clear as ice water. Freydís stood a little further back, sword in hand, her gaze fixed on the enemy as if she would tear him apart before he even set foot on the beach. Torfi played a melody on his flute, one so old even the trees knew it. Jobst stood beside him, puffing on his resin-filled horn, and the smoke coming from his nostrils made him look like a damned bad dragon.

"Remember," he said, grinning, "if it hurts, just don't stop."

The first boats touched down. Men jumped into the water, shouting, banging shields together. I walked toward them, slowly so they could see who they had chosen today. The snow crunched under my boots like old leather, and my breath hung in the air like a flag.

The first blow came from the left—a man as big as an ox, his sword held high above his head. I ducked, pulled the axe from the bottom up, and what remained of him fell back into the water. The second came right after, and the third, and then I stopped counting. The fjord soon smelled of blood and cold iron, and the screams mingled with the roar of the wind.

I don't know when it started, but at some point she was there—at the edge of my vision. A Valkyrie, her hair like frozen gold, her horse snorting, her eyes fixed on me. She said nothing, did nothing. She waited.

The battle raged on, and in the midst of the chaos stood Loki. Not in his full glory, but disguised as one of the enemies, a knife in his hand, a smile on his lips. He winked at me before disappearing, and suddenly one of my men almost stumbled into me—with a lance that didn't belong to us in his back.

Above us, Sköll and Hati chased the sun and moon, and the sky colored as if it were losing blood itself. Odin stood on a rock, spear in hand, his gaze fixed on

me. Not a word. Only the nod of a man who knows that history has long been decided.

I fought on, the axe heavy, the arm heavier, but the will light. Each blow brought me deeper into the frenzy, and every time an opponent fell, it felt less like a victory and more like a step down a path I already knew.

Then I saw him—the leader. Tall, dark, with a helmet that looked as if it had been made from the ribs of a dragon. He was standing at the bow of one of the last boats, and when our eyes met, I knew: it was either him or me. Probably both of us.

I charged, through snow, through blood, through screams. The raven took flight, circling above me, screeching like a broken prophecy. The leader leaped at me, his blade swung wide. We crashed together like two trees in a storm.

I don't know how long we fought. Time dissolved. There were only blows, parries, footsteps, breaths that turned into clouds of steam. Then, in a moment that felt like a gift, he left a gap. I took it. The axe found his neck, and the sound was that of a door closing for good.

He fell, and for a heartbeat the battle paused. The men behind him staggered, watching their leader disappear into the snow. Some fled. Others threw their weapons.

I stood there, panting, the blood in my ears louder than the wind. The Valkyrie had come closer. "Hallgrim Ragnarson," she said, her voice like a distant storm. "It's time."

I laughed. "Not yet," I said. "I still have mead in the barrel."

She smiled. "It won't go bad where we're going."

Behind her, the sky flickered as if a crack were opening. I smelled salt, blood, and fire. The voices of the fallen called out, quiet but haunting.

I looked toward the village. Ulf stood there, axe in hand, his gaze fixed on me. Svala wiped blood from his face. Freydís raised his sword in salute. Torfi played again, a melody that now sounded definitive. Jobst stood there, his horn empty, and nodded.

I knew I would leave. Not because I had to, but because it was the only way to end the story.

I approached the Valkyrie. The snow melted beneath my feet, as if it had been waiting. The horse lowered its head, I grabbed its mane, and swung myself up.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“I never was,” I said, “but that didn’t stop me.”

We rode off, and the fjord shrank, the village blurred. Above us, Sköll and Hati raced on, Odin watched us go, Loki grinned somewhere in the shadows.

And then there was only light.

It is said that on some nights, when the wind blows off the fjord and the fire burns high in the hall, one hears footsteps on the roof and laughter that is not quite of this world. And as the cup is passed around, they sometimes toast "to Hallgrim Ragnarson."

Some say he's now sitting in Odin's hall, drinking with the gods and cursing them when they pour too slowly. Others say he'll return when the horn blows.

But most people know that legends don't die. They just wait for someone to raise the next cup.

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