

IVAR THE BONELESS



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The cold awakening

It was still dark when the wind crept through the cracks in the wooden shack and gnawed at my bones. I woke because the cold bit—not like a woman teasing, but like a dog finally tasting blood. The straw beneath me was damp with the night's breath, and somewhere water dripped at irregular intervals. Drip. Drip. Drip. Like the heart of a dying animal that doesn't know it's long dead. I lay there, half awake, half dreaming, staring at the beams above me while my body refused to rise. The legs—those damned, useless sticks beneath my torso—felt as if they belonged to someone else. Maybe a dead man. Maybe myself, sometime later.

I heard the whispers of the others outside. Men's voices. Rough, broken throats that had roared through more cold nights than prayers. They were laughing at something I didn't understand, and that made it worse. When men laugh and you don't know why, you're the target. Always. I pulled the blanket higher, an old rag that smelled more of dog than fabric. But it didn't help. The cold crept on anyway, feeling its way up to my stomach, into my chest, and then, when it reached my heart, it laughed. A small, dirty cold with a knife in its hand.

Sometimes I thought the gods had made me out of boredom. Like a child who pees in the mud and sees what happens. And then I came. Ivar. The one who can't walk. The one who crawls. The one who came into the world with a curse on his back and a wrath that never sleeps. Mother always said I was a sign, but a sign for what? For her pain? For Father's shame? Or just for what happens when the gods are too drunk to pay attention to what they're creating?

I remember the look in her eyes when I was born. Not pity, not love—something in between. Like someone who finds an old knife and doesn't know whether to throw it away or use it. Father didn't say anything at the time. He just turned his head and walked out into the night. Later, Mother said he prayed to Odin. I think he was just drinking. Men rarely pray when they can be drunk.

Morning came as it always did: gray, empty, with a silence that tasted of snow. I dressed as best I could, pushed myself up onto my elbows, and swung my body sideways like a piece of wet wood. The sound of my bones—the faint cracking and grinding—was familiar. I called it music. Others called it pity. I crawled to the bucket and dipped my hands into the water, which had almost turned to ice. It burned my fingertips, but I needed the burn to make sure I was still there. The cold is honest; it doesn't lie to you. It tells you: you're not dead yet. Not yet.

I thought of the other boys in the village. How they ran, jumped, laughed. I knew them all. And they knew me. I was the monster they told their children in the evening when they wanted them to be grateful for their legs. "Eat your bread, or you'll end up like Ivar." I hated them. Every single one. Not because they could walk, but because they didn't deserve to. I saw them running, aimless, stumbling, laughing, fighting over nothing. Legs that meant freedom, wasted on stupidity. I needed them, those legs. I would have burned worlds with them.

But all I had was my will. And my hatred. Both burned hotter than any fire in the North.

Mother came in, silent as always. A woman of stone, with hands like axes and eyes filled with winter. She carried the scent of ash and milk. Her hair, gray as fog, clung to her forehead. "You're awake," she said. No good morning, no smile. Just those words, as if they were a burden. "I was never truly asleep," I answered, and she nodded, as if that weren't an answer, but a judgment.

She brought me bread and a piece of dried fish. I bit into it; it was tough as leather, but better than nothing. "They're talking about you outside," she said as she stoked the fire. "Don't they always?" "Louder this time." I looked at her. "Why?" "Because you laugh when you're about to fall."

I knew what she meant. Last night I'd been outside. Crawling, on the ground, under the torches. The men had been drinking, one had pushed me, and I'd fallen. The usual spectacle. Only this time I was laughing. Not out of joy, but because the pain showed me I was alive. I laughed in their faces while they fell silent. A cripple who laughs when he falls—they didn't like that. It upset the balance of their little world. In their world, the weak is silent. I was never silent.

"They say you're cursed," Mother said. "Maybe I am," I said. "But at least I'm not boring." She looked at me, for a long time, with that look that says everything and explains nothing. Then she left again, leaving me alone with the cold and my thoughts. I liked being alone. The silence had an honesty that humans don't possess. It doesn't ask questions. It doesn't expect anything. It's simply there. Like me.

I stared into the fire. The flames danced, and for a moment I saw faces in them. Men with helmets, blood in their beards, shouts I didn't yet know. I didn't know why, but I felt something was coming. Something big, something that would take me out of this damned hut. Maybe it was death, maybe it was glory. I couldn't tell the difference anymore.

Outside, a dog barked. Then silence. Then the clang of metal. I crawled to the crack in the door and looked out. The snow was red in one spot. One of the men lay there, silent, half in shadow. I couldn't see who it was. Only that something stirred inside me. Not sympathy. Not shock. Just the knowledge: It's beginning.

I crawled back, slowly, as the fire grew within me. Perhaps this was the "cold awakening" Mother had once spoken of when she was drunk. She said every man who wants to live must first freeze to death. Perhaps I had finally begun to melt.

I lay back in the damp straw, closed my eyes, and smiled. A thin, cold smile that bore more meaning than joy. And I swore in that moment that one day I would force them all to whisper my name—not out of pity, but out of fear. I was Ivar. The one who couldn't walk. But one day they would wish they'd never run away.

The snow lay silent. The kind of silence that screams at you if you listen too long. I stared at the door as if it were a gateway to hell—or to something worse: life outside. The dead man in the snow wasn't just anyone. I knew it even before I heard his name. In a village like this, no one dies easily. Every death is a message. A message written in blood that no one wants to read aloud.

I crept closer to the crack in the door. The wind had picked up, sweeping through the wood as if it wanted to blow away sin. I saw torches outside, saw shadows of men who realized too late that their voices were too loud. When men whisper, something has happened that they don't understand—or something that they understand too well. I felt my heart pounding against my ribs, like an animal wanting to get out. Not out of fear. Out of curiosity.

I liked death. Not because it was beautiful. Because it was honest. No games, no pity, no excuses. Just a cut, an end, silence. And yet it was never still inside me. I wanted to see it, understand it, smell it. Perhaps because I had survived too long in a body that didn't want to live.

I pulled myself up, step by step, arm by arm. My hands burned from the cold wood. I felt the pain in my back, smiling at me like an old friend. Outside, someone shouted, "He's dead!" – as if it weren't obvious. I laughed quietly. People always had to say what they felt out loud so they could believe it themselves. I hated that.

I pushed the door open, just a crack. The wind hit me like a fist. Snowflakes, like little white knives, whipped my face. I tasted the salt of my own blood dripping from my torn lip. And then I saw him.

The man lay on his back, his eyes open but empty, as if they had already forgotten what they had ever seen. His beard was covered in ice, and his mouth was half-open, as if he wanted to say something before the knife came. It was Skarde, the hunter. A bastard with too much pride and too little brains. I remembered his voice when he had laughed at me two nights ago for falling. Now he lay there, and the snow drank him in.

"What happened?" someone shouted. "A wolf, perhaps." "No wolf cuts like that." "Then a human." "Who?" No one answered.

I saw the cut on Skarde's throat. Clean. Fast. No hesitation. No struggle. This wasn't an act of fear. This was a judgment. Someone had decided this man was finished.

I didn't know why, but I felt it in my gut: This was the beginning. Not of a war, not of a story, but of me. Something in this cold woke me, tore me from the filth in which I had spent my life. I crawled further out, and no one saw me. No one pays attention to those who live on the ground.

I saw Mother standing among the men. She was bareheaded, the snow clung to her hair, but she wasn't trembling. Her eyes rested briefly on me. No shock, no terror, just that one tiny nod—as if she had known I was coming. And in that moment, I knew: She knew more. She knew more and more.

I crept closer, and a few of the men stepped back. Not out of respect. Out of disgust. A cripple in the snow, that was bad luck. I enjoyed it. I saw their faces, how they tried not to look at me, yet couldn't look away. I felt their fear, that small, cowardly tremor they themselves didn't notice. And I grinned.

"Why are you laughing, Boneless?" one asked. "Because he's dead and I'm alive," I said.

The silence afterward was sweet. So sweet I could almost taste it. A few of them cursed quietly. One spat into the snow as if trying to wash me away. Mother came to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. Her fingers were cold but firm. "Go back," she said. "Why?" "Because men die and you live. That's enough for today."

I wanted to object, but there was something in her voice that brooked no argument. So I nodded and crawled back, but slowly, so they all had time to stare at me. I wanted them to remember every damn twitch of my arms. I wanted to stay in their minds.

The fire was still burning inside. I sat down in front of it, stretched out my hands, and felt the blood flowing again. It felt good. Painful, but good. I thought of Skarde. I saw his empty eyes and wondered what it would be like if I'd had the strength to do that. If I'd had the hands to hold a knife that cuts without shaking. Maybe then I would have smiled, too.

I didn't know who had killed him, but I didn't care. I envied the perpetrator. Not his courage, but the act itself. The feeling of having power over something that was always stronger than oneself. Death was the only justice I understood.

Mother returned later. She sat opposite me, stared into the fire, and said nothing. We rarely spoke, but words were overrated anyway. I sensed she knew what I was thinking. Maybe she even knew I was enjoying it.

"He was a bad man," she said after a while. "Then it wasn't a loss." She nodded slowly. "Sometimes you lose what you never had." I didn't understand that until years later.

The wind died down, but the silence remained. I heard the crackling of the wood in the fire, saw the flames casting shadows on the wall. They looked like warriors. Like men with swords. Like images from a world that didn't belong to me—not yet.

I lay down, and when I closed my eyes, there was no sleep. Only this dull, burning feeling in my chest. The knowledge that I would never be one of them. And that I had to use that as my weapon.

The snow outside continued to fall. Slowly, inexorably, as if it wanted to bury everything that had happened today. But I knew: It wouldn't bury anything. Not me. Not the awakening.

I swore to myself that I wouldn't die without them all knowing who I was. Not the lame son, not the crawler, not the pity. I would be the knife they all fear when they hear a noise in the snow at night.

I was Ivar. And I had just learned that there are worse things than not being able to walk. You can become a storm even without legs.

The day went on as if nothing had happened. The men talked about wolves, about tracks, about the gods who send signs when they're bored. No one spoke about what was really on their minds: Fear. Distrust. Guilt. I knew that smell—it was thicker than blood, sweeter than smoke. It was the stench of lies that settles in a village when someone disrupts order. And Skarde was dead, so someone had to be to blame. Anyone. And I was always a good target.

I stayed inside, but my thoughts were running. They ran, jumped, and smashed through walls my body couldn't reach. I could feel the hatred growing inside me, silently, steadily, like a tree that doesn't need sun. I had seen the dead man. I had seen the fear in his eyes. And I knew—for the first time in my life—that power lay not in muscles, but in what others believed you could do.

I ate nothing. I barely drank. I just sat there and listened to the village breathing. Every footstep outside sounded like a heartbeat. Every shout like a confession. When Mother returned that afternoon, she had something on her face I didn't recognize. Not sadness, not fear—something in between. Maybe it was tiredness. Maybe it was pride, well hidden.

"They're looking for clues," she said. "Won't find anything." "Maybe they don't want you to." I nodded. "Stay inside today," she said. But I couldn't.

Night came early. A gray nothingness between day and darkness. The wind had died down, and the snow glittered like cold glass. I crawled to the door and opened it, slowly, as if stealing a breath. There was no one outside. Only the spot where Skarde had lain was empty, but the blood was still there. Dark, almost black in the moonlight. I smelled it. Metallic, sweet, like something alive even though it was dead. I crawled over and dipped my fingers in. It was cold, but not frozen. I rubbed it between my fingers. I wanted to know what it felt like when life ended. It felt like everything else—pointless.

Then I heard footsteps. Slow, heavy, drunken. I turned and saw Bjarke, Skarde's brother. A tall man, shoulders like rocks, eyes red from brandy. "What are you doing, you creep?" I remained silent. "Are you laughing at my brother?" I looked at him without blinking. "I rarely laugh. And never for the dead." He stepped closer. The snow crunched under his boots. "You saw him, didn't you?" "Everyone saw him." "But you first, right?" I shrugged. "Maybe." "Then it was you. You or your witch mother."

I felt the hatred inside me thicken the air. I wanted to scream, but my voice remained calm. "I can barely walk, Bjarke. Do you really want to believe I chased your brother in the snow?" He grinned crookedly. "Sometimes the lame

do things even the gods don't understand." Then he kicked me in the side. Not hard enough to kill me—just to humiliate me. I fell, gasping, feeling the cold snow on my cheek. I tasted blood. Mine this time. And I laughed. Very quietly, but he heard.

"Don't laugh, you filthy beast!" he yelled, lifting his foot to kick again. I grabbed the first thing my hand could find—a stone, jagged, heavy, half-frozen. I swung it as hard as I could. Not high, not far, but enough. The stone hit him in the knee. A muffled thud, then a scream, raw, surprised, furious. I crawled forward, threw myself against him, bit his thigh, tasted fur, sweat, skin. He stumbled, cursed, kicked at me, but I held on, bit deeper. I was not a man in that moment. I was an animal.

He collapsed into the snow, and I was on top of him, my hands around his neck, the stone in my fist. I hit. Not often. Not cleanly. But with everything in me. I felt the stone hit something, and it cracked. I heard him trying to breathe, and I heard the air stall. I screamed. I didn't know if it was from pain, rage, or release. Maybe all of the above.

Then silence. Only my breath, which sounded like wind in a dead tree.

I looked down at him. His face was half snow, half blood. He was still moving. Not much. Just the trembling of a body that refuses to give up. I crawled back, trembling, gasping, my heart racing. I hadn't planned to kill him. I hadn't planned anything. But there it was: the taste of violence. And it didn't taste of guilt. It tasted of truth.

I felt no remorse. Only heat. I knew I'd opened something that would never close again. I looked at my hands—red, chapped, shaking—and I swore I'd never wash them again. Not that night. Not in this lifetime.

He wheezed, coughed, and tried to sit up. I crawled over to him and looked him in the eyes. "I told you, I rarely laugh," I whispered. "But today... today I'm laughing for you."

I smiled. Not broadly, not proudly—just quietly. Then I left him lying there and crawled back to the hut. Behind me lay snow. White. Red. White.

Mother sat inside. She had rekindled the fire, as if she'd known I'd come back. Her eyes studied me, seeing my hands, the blood, the dirt. "Was it necessary?" she asked quietly. "Yes." "Then keep quiet about it." I nodded. She stood up,

took a rag, and washed my hands. Not like a mother, but like someone cleaning a tool. Not a word. No judgment. Just the water, softly lapping against my skin.

When she was finished, she said, "Now you're one of them. Only more honest."

I sat by the fire, and for the first time, I felt no cold. Only a burning sensation. In my bones. In my head. In my heart.

I suddenly understood why men start wars. Not for glory. Not for gods. Because violence is the only thing that makes you forget that you are weak.

I was Ivar. And that evening I realized that even without legs, you can stand upright—if you kneel to kill.

Morning came like a slap in the face. No sunrise, no gentle awakening—just a gray light that pushed its way into every crack, as if it wanted to witness. I lay there, half on my stomach, half twisted, and heard the wood creak. Mother was already up; I smelled the smoke from the fire, the old fish, the cold that kept creeping in, no matter how tightly the door was barricaded. I felt every muscle. Every breath reminded me of what I had done. And yet—there was no regret. Only this strange calm. This silence that tasted of power.

I sat up, pulling myself up with my arms, my legs limp and useless. I didn't hate them anymore. I simply didn't need them. I had become something else that night. Something that lived on the ground but stood above the heads of others.

There were voices outside. Muffled, excited. I heard the word "Bjarke." I heard "blood." I heard "curse." I grinned. Mother looked at me as if she had already sensed the grin. "They know someone hit him." "But not who." "They're guessing. And they're always wrong until you help them guess right." I nodded. "Will you do it?" "No. They should wonder."

She looked at me, and there was something in her eyes—not fear, not pride, but that cold knowledge that only mothers who've seen too much of life have. She knew there was no stopping me.

I crawled to the door. The snow was so bright that it almost blinded me. Men stood together, close together, as if they could whisper encouragement to each other. One carried Bjarke, half supported, half dragged. His face was a red lump, his eyes glassy. He was alive, but only half alive. I saw the imprint of the stone in his skin, and for a moment I felt my heart laugh—not loudly, just quietly, like an animal that has had its fill.

"Who did this?" one asked. "He says he doesn't know." "A wolf?" "A wolf that throws stones?"

A few men laughed, briefly, harshly. Then silence. I crept closer, and they saw me. And I saw their gaze change. It was only a moment, barely longer than a breath, but I recognized it. Respect. No, not respect—fear. They knew nothing, but they felt something. Something they couldn't express. They looked at me, and suddenly I was no longer lame Ivar, the pity of the gods. I was what happens in the night when no one is looking.

I remained silent. I didn't say a word. I let the snow speak, let the blood tell the story. One approached me—an old warrior, Eirik. One of those who used to be everything and are now just stories. "You have something to say, boy?" "I rarely say things people want to hear." He looked at me as if testing me. "If it was you—then say it. If not—then pray." I grinned. "I don't pray. The gods don't listen to me." "Maybe they do now." "Then let them learn to listen."

He was silent. And then he left. Not another word. Just that strange nod old men make when they see something that reminds them of themselves.

Mother came later. She brought me water, bread, and the look of a woman who knows that something has been born that can no longer be contained. "You should have killed him," she said quietly. I looked at her. "He'll talk. Maybe not today. But soon." "Then let him." "He'll hurt you." I shrugged. "He'll try. That's enough for me."

She stoked the fire. The smoke crept along the beams, gathering under the ceiling like gray memories. I looked at my hands, still rough, cut. I liked the sight. They were no longer children's hands. They were drawn, marked, real.

I knew the day would come when I would have to hit again. Not out of anger, but because the world would demand it of me. And I swore to myself that I would never again act out of fear, only out of necessity. Violence wasn't an act; it was a tool. And I had found it.

Outside, they started shoveling Bjarke's blood out of the snow. As if that could remove guilt. I laughed quietly. Mother turned around. "What's so funny?"

"They think snow is cleansing."

"And you?" "I think he's just covering up the dirt until spring comes."

She nodded. "Then hope the winter lasts long."

I thought of Skarde, of Bjarke, of the sound bones make when they break. I thought of the expression on the men's faces. I thought of the silence afterward. And I knew that had been my moment of birth. Not as a child. As something else. Something that grows when others look away.

I looked out the window. The snow fell more heavily. And for a moment, I thought even the gods lowered their eyes. Perhaps out of shame. Perhaps out of fear.

I smiled. For the first time, not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I was no longer a victim. I was what victims become when they're left lying around for too long.

I was Ivar. And I was awake.

The sun barely rose above the rooftops, but the light still burned my eyes. I hadn't slept, I'd only lain, waited, and listened. Outside, the village moved like an animal licking a wound. The men no longer walked alone. Women whispered as if words could poison the snow. Children no longer ran across the square. They saw me and stopped, as if someone had shouted "Quiet!" I was no longer invisible. And that was more dangerous than any blow.

I pulled myself to the window, the frame cold beneath my fingers. Bjarke was still lying over there, in the healer's hut. I saw the smoke from the chimney, thin, desperate. They said he was alive. I knew better. A man who falls like that never really gets up again. I should have finished him off. Mother was right. But something inside me wanted him to survive. Not out of pity. Out of calculation. A half-dead man talks more than a whole man stays silent. And fear needs a face that still breathes.

I heard footsteps. Lots of them. I smelled them before I saw them—sweat, fur, iron. The whole village smelled of fear, but men who drink to gain courage smell of metal. Mother stood by the stove, pretending she didn't notice. I crawled back into the gloom, lay down, and listened.

The door opened. Three men. The leader, Eirik, the old warrior, was there again. Next to him was a younger man, broad-shouldered, with too much faith in his eyes. And a third, whom I didn't recognize—pale face, red nose, someone who wanted to speak before he thought.

"Where is the boy?" asked Eirik. Mother didn't turn around. "He's asleep." "In the middle of the day?" "He sleeps whenever he wants. The gods didn't build him by your clock."

A brief silence. I heard one of them stepping restlessly. "Bjarke says it was him." "Bjarke says a lot when he's drunk," Mother answered. "He's not drinking anymore," growled the one with the red nose. "Then he's lying when he's sober."

Eirik stepped closer, I could hear his weight on the ground. "He should come out. I want to see him." "Why?" "Because men need to know who they can trust." "And you trust a cripple more than yourself?" "I only trust someone who stays upright when it gets cold."

I couldn't help it. I crawled out of the darkness, slowly, loud enough for them to hear me. I saw their looks. Three faces, three different kinds of disgust. I smiled. "I'm awake," I said. "You hit Bjarke," the younger one said, too eagerly. "I didn't hit him. I showed him what it was like to be down."

Eirik laughed briefly, dryly, without joy. "And what did he show you?" "That men are softer than they think."

Silence. The kind of silence that settles before someone wants blood. Eirik took a step closer. I smelled his breath. Old, sour, like meat hung too long. "You're clever, boy. But cleverness isn't a virtue in the North. You die from it." "I die every day anyway," I said. "The difference is, I notice it."

Mother looked at me with that look that says: now is the moment when words kill. Eirik nodded slowly. "He's not stupid. But stupidity protects you from trouble. Smartness doesn't." He turned to the others. "Leave him alone. The snow will judge what must fall." Then they left. No threat. No judgment. Just the sound of their footsteps, fading until it disappeared in the wind.

I stayed there, in the doorway, feeling the cold tugging at me, but she couldn't get back in. She knew who she belonged to. Mother approached me, quietly, as if she didn't want to disturb the moment. "You should have kept quiet." "I did." "Not enough." I grinned. "Perhaps I've learned that silence can also speak."

She sighed, but there was a tiny twitch in the corner of her mouth. Not a smile, but almost. "You have them all against you." "No," I said. "I have them with me. They just don't know it yet."

I walked—no, I crawled—out. The snow was frozen hard, supporting my weight. I didn't feel it. I only felt the stares on me. A few women whispered, one pulled her child away as I passed. One of the men, a baker or something useless, spat in my direction. The saliva froze before it reached me. I laughed. Not because it was funny, but because I wanted the echo. Laughter is contagious, and fear hates contagion.

I stopped in the middle of the square. I looked at them all. Not a word, not a sign. Just my gaze. And I swore to myself: From now on, they would see me, even if I was silent. I was no longer a marginal figure, not a shadow, not a flaw in creation. I was the focal point around which their silence revolved.

I returned to the hut, slowly, deliberately. Mother waited. "You enjoy it," she said. "I breathe it." "Then get used to the taste. Power tastes sweet at first. Bitter later." I nodded. "I like bitter."

She looked into the fire. "I know. You're my son."

Outside, a branch snapped in the wind. The day was still young, but something had died—not Bjarke, not Skarde, but the old balance. I felt it inside me. I was no longer part of the village. I was the crack in it.

And in this crack I would grow.

Evening came like a sickness. Slowly but surely. It crept over the rooftops, turning the sky gray, then black, then something in between. I sat by the fire, which was barely smoldering, and listened to the wind begin to speak again. It spoke in languages I understood—angry, restless, restless. The smoke burned my eyes, but I let it burn. I wanted to feel that I still felt something.

Mother had gone out to fetch water. She didn't trust the village, but she did trust the darkness. Darkness betrays no one. I was alone, and the hut breathed with me—creaking, hissing, as if it were alive.

Then came the sound. Far away at first, muffled, heavy. Footsteps in the snow. Not one, but many. I knew immediately what it was. No coincidence, no visit. It was intentional. I crawled closer to the door, slowly pushing myself up, my body tired but awake. I looked through the crack. Light. Torches. Five, six, maybe more. And faces. Faces you remember because they hate you.

I saw Bjarke. Or what was left of him. He stood on a stick, his leg bandaged, his cheek ripped open. The wound was black, his eyes red. And in this darkness, I saw something new in him—fear disguised as courage. He pointed at the hut.

My hut. "In there!" he shouted. His voice sounded like metal left in a fire too long.

One stepped forward. Eirik wasn't there. Only younger, louder men. The kind who only find courage when someone else is burning. "Come out, Boneless!" one shouted. I remained silent. "Come out, or we'll get you!" I grinned quietly. They didn't know that silence is louder than any answer.

I heard Mother coming. Someone outside called her name. "Let's leave the boy! He's bringing trouble!" "He's only bringing what you deserve!" she called back. Her voice cut through the night like a knife. A stone flew. Hit the wall. Then another. The wood splintered. I crawled to the door, feeling my heart constrict. Not with fear. With anger.

I lifted the latch and pushed open the door. The wind stung my face, the fire from the torches danced in my eyes. I saw them all. Ten, maybe. Men who drank more than they thought. Men who mistook courage for noise. Bjarke stood in the middle. "You beat me," he shouted. "I let you live," I said. A murmur went through the crowd. "He's a demon!" someone shouted. "No," I said. "Just honest."

I crawled forward a bit. The snow beneath my hands was hard, cold, clean. "You want to know who I am?" I asked. No one answered. "I am what you fear when you're alone. I am your mirror, and you don't like what you see."

A few stepped back. One laughed nervously. "You talk like an old man!" "Then listen like a child!" I shouted.

I saw Bjarke. He was shivering. Not from the cold. "If you want to hit me again," I said, "come here. I'm already on the ground. You can't lose." No one moved. Only the crackling of the torches answered.

I crawled on until the snow made my hands numb. "No one? Then go. Or burn. I'm used to it."

And then it happened. Someone hurled his torch. It flew, slowly, through the air, spun, a piece of fire in motion—and struck the wall. Wood, dry, tired, welcomed the flame like an old lover. The fire leaped high. Mother screamed. I heard men shouting, in confusion, orders, curses. And I laughed. Loudly. Deeply. I laughed until my throat hurt.

They stared at me as if I were madness itself. Maybe I was. Maybe this was freedom at last. I laughed as the fire grew, as the flames licked at the beams, as

the smoke choked me. I crawled out, past them, feeling their gazes like arrows in my back. No one moved. No man raised an arm. They backed away. Not from the fire. From me.

Mother came after me, coughing, her hair full of sparks. "Come!" she called. I turned around and saw our hut burning. The first home I'd ever known turned to smoke, as if she wanted to get rid of me.

"Look," I said quietly. "I see." "This is the beginning." She nodded. "Then go." "Where?" "Somewhere they don't know you yet."

But I stood still. I wanted them to see what they had done. To see me, in the light of the flames, with the snow beneath me now glowing red. I was no longer a boy. No longer a son. No pity. I was the fire.

And when the hut collapsed, I knew that everything that had ever been taken from me was now mine—only in a different form. Fire. Anger. Fear. I was made of them.

I turned to the men. "You call me a demon? Then you created me."

No one answered. Only the snow fell, quietly, unmoved. And somewhere, deep inside me, something laughed—no longer a human, no longer a god. Only Ivar, the Boneless. And the cold awakening was finally complete.

The morning smelled of burnt wood and wet fur. I sat in the snow, wrapped in a blanket that carried more smoke than warmth. Beside me was my mother, silent, upright, with soot on her face. The wind had extinguished the fire during the night, but the smoke still hung over the village like a memory that wouldn't go away. Traces everywhere—black lines in the white, charred boards, remnants of sparks. My home was now dust. And I felt lighter than ever.

The villagers came one by one. Not close enough to help us, but close enough to stare. They acted as if they had come to see if the fire had died down. But in truth, they wanted to see if I had laid down. I saw their faces—no anger, no compassion. Only that silence that arises when people see something they would rather forget. I understood them. I was no longer one of them. I was what they hear at night, when the wind whistles through the roofs. I was the sound after prayer, when no one answers.

Mother spoke first. "You could go," she said. "Where?" "Somewhere they don't know you." "Then it all starts over." "Sometimes that's the point." I laughed quietly. It sounded like something was breaking. "I'm not a man for new

beginnings."

"Then don't build another house," she said. "Build something that burns, but never burns up."

She stood up, the snow crunching beneath her feet. I looked up at her—small but firm, like a root surviving the frost. She no longer looked like a mother. She looked like a part of the landscape. I knew she had never pitied me. She had only watched me. Maybe she had already known all this was coming. Maybe that's why she had never stopped me.

I looked at my hands. They were black with soot, cracked, full of small cuts. But they felt right. As if they finally belonged to me. I looked at them as if they were tools—not beautiful, not clean, but honest. Hands that don't create, but finish.

"They'll tell the children," I said. "The demon in the snow who laughs when it burns." "Then let them tell," Mother said. "Stories last longer than houses." I nodded. "And longer than people."

A few men stood at the edge of the square. Eirik was with them. He approached, slowly, as if testing the wind. "You have courage," he said. "No," I replied. "I just have nothing to lose." He looked at me for a long time, then nodded. "That's worse than courage." I saw him look around, then whispered, "They'll come back. Maybe tonight, maybe in a week. If you stay, you'll have to fight. If you leave, you'll have to learn to lead." "I can't leave." "Then stay. But don't be a victim anymore." I grinned. "I never was."

He left, and I knew it wasn't a threat. It was a promise. I watched him go until his back disappeared into the snow.

Mother gathered a few half-burned pieces of wood. "For what?" I asked. "For later. You never know when you'll need fire again." I watched her work, quietly, steadily. I liked that. No grand gestures, no words about fate or gods. Just doing. Perhaps that was all that remained when you'd lost too much: doing.

I crept closer to the fire she had relit. It flickered dimly, almost timidly. I held my hands over it and thought about everything that had happened last night. The blood. The screams. The laughter. I felt nothing. No guilt. No joy. Only this empty space in which something new could form. Perhaps the awakening wasn't a moment at all, but a wound that remains open until one learns to bear it.

I looked up at the sky. The snow didn't stop. And for a moment, just a moment, I thought I heard the gods laughing—quietly, somewhere behind the clouds. Maybe they were laughing at me. Maybe with me. I laughed back.

Mother looked at me. "What is it?" "I think they've finally noticed me." "The gods?" "No. The world."

I crawled closer to her, looked into the embers. The fire reflected in my eyes, and I swore to myself that I would never sleep again as long as something was still burning somewhere.

The hut was ashes, but I was there. And you can forge swords from ashes if you just stay hot enough.

I was Ivar the Boneless. And winter had just begun.

Blood in the Snow

I left the village at dawn. No goodbye, no words. Just the snow beneath my hands, the wind in my face, and the smoke trailing behind me like a shadow that has seen too much. Mother stayed behind. She said she had to be there when the ashes grew cold. I knew that was her way of saying: *Go already*.

I crawled, pulling myself forward, slowly, steadily, like an animal accustomed to the earth. Every breath cut into my lungs, but I felt alive. The cold was honest. It doesn't ask who you are. It simply eats you if you stop. And I didn't intend to stay.

Behind me lay the village—a handful of huts, smoke, guilt. I no longer heard voices. Maybe they were sleeping. Maybe they were talking about me. Maybe they were praying that I would freeze to death. That was fine with me. If the gods had cursed me, at least they should get something out of it.

The snow crunched beneath me, steady, soothing. I liked the sound. It sounded like a heart beating, even when no one believes it anymore. I saw no tracks except my own. No animal, no person, nothing. Just white. Endless, cold white.

I thought of Mother. Her hands, strong, rough, that had raised me when I still believed greatness was a lie. I knew she would survive. She was like stone—

nothing could break her, only erode her. I wasn't like her. I was softer, more burning, made of a different material. I was made to shatter.

After a few hours, I could no longer feel my fingers. My knees were numb, my breathing shallow. I paused for a moment, looking out over the vast, empty plain. No sign of life. Just snow, wind, and somewhere in the distance, the call of a crow. The sound drifted through the fog like a memory of something that never happened.

I laughed. Loudly, hoarsely, until my throat hurt. A cripple, alone in the wilderness, laughing into the wind—that was my prayer. If Odin wanted to see me, he should know that I would give him the middle finger, if I had one warm enough to raise.

I crawled on. The blood on my hands had cracked, frozen, and cracked again. I saw the marks I left behind—red dots in the snow, like small, insignificant confessions. I thought of the title they gave me. *The Boneless One*. It sounded like a curse, but I was starting to like him. He suited me. No weight, no foundation. Just willpower. Willpower can run, even when your legs are dead.

Around midday, I found tracks. Deep, broad—men's feet, at least four, maybe five. Fresh. I could almost smell them. Smoke, iron, sweat. I followed them. Not out of curiosity, but because I was hungry. The last fish had been two days ago, and the bread had burned during the night. I thought of Eirik, of his words: *If you stay, you have to fight. If you leave, you have to lead*. I didn't know how to lead. But I knew how to survive.

After a while, I saw them. Four men, heavysset, wrapped in furs, axes at their sides, one with a shield carved with a wolf. They were sitting by the fire, laughing, drinking, tearing at a piece of meat. Strangers. Not village peasants. Warriors or thieves—the difference was small.

I stayed in the shadow of the rocks, watching them. I knew that smell: blood, smoke, men who believe more in strength than in intelligence. I liked it. It was familiar. I crept closer, slowly, silently. One noticed me. "What the hell...?" he shouted, standing up. I raised my head. "Just a man," I said. He laughed. "A man? You're half snow!" I grinned. "At least I won't freeze."

The others came closer. "What do you want, little one?" "Fire. And meat." "And what will you give in return?" "Nothing. I'm not a merchant."

They laughed. That loud, stupid laugh men let out before they become cruel. One stepped behind me, kicked me. I fell forward, my hands sinking into the snow. I heard them laugh, heard their words:

"Look, he wants to share!" "Maybe he wants to dance too!"

I raised my head. "I don't dance. I bite."

The next one came closer, kicked me. I grabbed his leg and yanked on it. He stumbled, cursed, kicked me again. I grabbed his foot and bit down. The leather tasted of sweat and salt. He roared. The others pulled him away, cursing, laughing, rage. I lay there, panting, blood in my mouth, laughing.

"You're crazy!" someone shouted. "No," I said. "I'm awake."

They stared at me, uncertain, between mockery and fear. One, perhaps the oldest, stepped forward. "Leave him alone. He's already succumbed to the cold. No human survives like that." "I'm not human," I whispered.

They turned away and sat back down by the fire. I stayed where I was. They ignored me, but I felt their gazes returning again and again. I was like an animal you don't want to kill because you don't know what will happen if you do.

I saw the meat they were roasting. I smelled it. I waited. They drank. A lot. The bottle went around in circles. Their voices grew louder, heavier. I crept closer. Slowly. Patiently. The snow muffled every sound. I reached for the meat, hot, greasy, burnt. I tore off a piece and stuffed it in my mouth. The taste was divine. I laughed again, this time with joy.

"Hey! That's ours!" I looked up. "Not anymore."

They wanted to get up, but something held them back. Maybe the alcohol, maybe the look in my eyes. I looked at the older one. "What's your name?" I asked. "Why?" "Because I want to know your name in case I need to remember it."

He grinned. "Rurik." "Then thank you, Rurik."

He nodded. No enemy. Not yet. Sometimes that's enough.

I continued eating, slowly, with my hands, like an animal. And as I chewed, I knew: I was out now. Beyond pity, beyond shame. And out there, life was honest.

I looked into the snow. Drops of blood, fresh, maybe mine, maybe an animal's. And I thought: *Blood in the snow looks more beautiful than peace.*

I laughed quietly. The wind laughed along.

The night devoured the land, and the fire was the only thing that resisted it. Four men and I, a sliver of warmth in the middle of nowhere. The wood crackled, the flames cast long shadows, and I saw them moving—these men, strong, heavy, satiated by meat, by mead. Their faces were red from drinking, their hands calloused, and yet I saw something there that I liked: tiredness. Tiredness makes people honest.

I lay at the edge of the fire, half in the snow, half in the light. I had eaten, quenched my hunger, but not my thirst. Not for mead—for meaning. I wanted to know how far I could go before they realized I'd long since begun leading them.

"Where do you come from, Bone Man?" asked the one with the scar above his eye. "From where no one wants to stay." "So from everywhere," he laughed. "Maybe."

Rurik, the eldest, watched me. He spoke little, drank less, but saw everything. "You're not from around here," he said. "I never am." "You've got your eye on something. Not a peasant, not a beggar." "I'm what's left when everything else dies."

They laughed again, but not like before. This time there was a tone in it that reeked of respect. The man with the scar shook his head. "Gods, you talk like a seer." "Or like a madman," muttered the youngest. "It's the same thing," I said.

The fire threw sparks into the wind. I watched them die away and thought of the village, the flames, the smell of smoke in my clothes. I was like the fire—small, but unstoppable if I was given enough wood. And these men, drunk, loud, dull—they were wood.

"What do you want?" I asked. "South," said Rurik. "Trade, loot, women, if the gods are merciful." "And if they aren't?" "Then we'll take it anyway." I nodded. "Gods don't like that." "Gods don't like anything," he said. "That's why they're gods."

I grinned. I liked him. There was something in his voice I understood—anger that had grown old. "I'll come with you," I said. "You?" laughed the youngest.

"How will you follow us—crawl?" "I don't need legs. I just need a destination."
"And that would be?" "More than you have."

Rurik laughed quietly. Not mockingly. More like someone who recognizes something that frightens him, but also pleases him. "If you want to survive, Bone Man, you have to be able to fight." "I've already fought." "And?" "I'm still alive."

That was enough. Men don't respect words, only survival.

Later, as they slept, I stayed awake. I saw their bodies in the glow of the embers, heard their snoring, their breathing, that heavy, steady breathing of men who think the night belongs to them. I knew better. The night belongs to no one. It takes what it wants.

I saw their weapons, their backpacks, their boots. I could have stolen from them. But I wanted more. I wanted to know how they thought, how they felt, where they broke. Power lies not in what you take, but in what you make of others. I was not a thief. I was an apprentice of control.

Rurik tossed and turned in his sleep. I saw the scars on his neck, old wounds that told stories. I wondered how many men he had killed. And how many times he himself had died without dying. I understood that. We were brothers in disarray.

The wind died down. Only the fire flickered. I crept closer, warming my hands. The flames reflected in my eyes, and I thought: *Maybe I'm fire. I'm just pretending to be snow.*

I heard the crows. Distant, but clear. Three calls, then silence. A sign, the old people used to say. I didn't believe in signs. But they believed in me, and that was enough.

I lay down, my face to the embers, and murmured, "If I'm still alive tomorrow, something will start." And deep down, I knew that wasn't a wish. It was a command.

The morning was gray as an old scar. No sunrise, no singing, no color. Only a sky that looked tired of fighting. I was the first to wake up. The men were still lying by the fire, wrapped in blankets that stank of smoke and sweat. I saw their faces. Peaceful, stupid, vulnerable. Men all look the same in their sleep—like children who've forgotten what they dreamed about.

I crawled closer to the fire and threw in the remaining wood. The embers devoured it greedily, as if they knew it was the last. I felt the heat in my hands, and for a moment I remembered the fire in the village. I thought of the smell of burnt wood and fear. I thought of Mother. I wondered if she was still alive. I hoped so—but not because I needed her. But because I wanted her to see what I would become.

Rurik woke up first. Not a word. Just that glance, brief, searching, alert. A man who had learned to live in a world where every sound could be a knife. He nodded at me. No greeting, no suspicion. Just recognition—quiet, honest.

"You sleep little," he said. "I've learned that dreams are just a second hell."
"Then you're further along than most."

The others woke up, one by one. Growling, cursing, the usual awakening of men who've drunk too much. I watched them. Each had his own weakness. The one with the scar was afraid of silence—always spoke when it came. The youngest was curious but stupid—that was useful. The third was strong but suspicious. He would be the first to be broken.

Rurik stepped closer to me. "We're heading south. Over the pass, then through the valley. If you come with us, you'll have to keep up." "I'll keep my pace," I said. "And what will you do if the wolves come?" "I'll wait until they feed, and then I'll take what's left."

He laughed. Short, rough, genuine. "Good. A hungry man survives longer."

We set off. The sun was barely there, a pale patch behind the clouds. The snow was hard, frozen, supporting even me. I pulled myself forward with my arms, steadily, rhythmically. No whining, not a word. The men looked at me with pity at first, then annoyance, then not at all. That's how you win: by remaining silent longer than the others.

I watched them as they walked. Their boots left deep tracks. They huffed, cursed, and groaned at the cold. I crawled in the shadow of their strength and felt superior. Strength fatigued. Will not.

After an hour, my hands were bleeding. I bound them with a piece of cloth I'd stolen from the youngest during the night. He'd never notice. Men never notice when you take something they don't value.

The wind picked up. Snowflakes, hard as sand, whipped against my face. I heard Rurik cursing, heard the one with the scar praying, half jokingly, half

seriously. I smiled. "The gods sleep when you call them," I said. "And when do they listen?" "When you scream, without a name."

Rurik looked at me as if he wanted to say something, but he let it go. I realized I had him. Not completely, but a little bit. Words are like knives—they don't have to cut deep, just where it hurts.

We stopped at midday. The fire was small, the meat tough. The youngest whined. "How much farther?" "Until the cold stops asking you," I said. "What do you mean?" "That you'll notice when it's too late."

Rurik grinned. "He has the mouth of a skald." "Or a dead man," said the one with the scar. "That's the same thing," I said.

I ate slowly, chewing every bite as if it were my last. I liked the silence between sentences. Those brief pauses when men consider whether to listen or forget. I knew: the more they thought about my words, the more they belonged to me.

In the afternoon we reached a hill. The wind whistled through the rocks, and the sky was so empty I thought it had stopped breathing. Down in the valley—snow, trees, shadows. And there: something dark. Movement. "What's that?" asked the youngest. Rurik narrowed his eyes. "Ravens. Too many." I smiled. "Where there are ravens, there's meat." "Or dead." "Both."

We moved on. I sensed the men growing restless. Not because of the ravens, but because of me. I saw it in their eyes. They didn't know whether to see me as a burden or a sign. I was both. And I liked that.

By evening, the camp was silent. I lay awake. I heard them whispering. "He's strange." "He talks like a sorcerer." "Or like a child who's seen too much." "Maybe we should let him." "And if he survives?" "Then he'll follow us."

I smiled in the dark. They were afraid. Not much, not yet. But they felt it. And fear is like fire—you just have to blow on it to make it grow.

I closed my eyes, and the wind played in my hair. I thought of blood in the snow, of ravens, of fire. And I knew: I would never be alone again. Not because they liked me, but because they wondered what would happen if I got angry.

I fell asleep with that thought. And the snow outside was silent, like a gun that hadn't been drawn yet.

Morning came not in colors, but in sounds: the cracking of ice, the clanging of metal, the distant, impatient cawing of ravens. I opened my eyes, and the world was a single breath of white and gray. Rurik was already standing, gazing south, his hand on the axe handle. The others were pawing, pulling furs tighter, cursing the cold. I crept closer, saw the trail the wind had laid—a line of dark snow leading down into the valley. To where the ravens danced.

"There's something down there," said Rurik. "What?" asked the youngest, his voice tearing through the air like thin wood. "Death." I grinned. "Then we finally have company."

We set off. The descent was arduous; the snow was too deep, the ground too soft. I glided more than crawled, and every time my hands touched the snow, I felt the pain in my joints—a good sign: pain means you're not petrified yet. Ravens circled above us, black spots against an empty sky. I counted them. There were more of them the closer we got. More and more.

The smell hit us first. Not fresh, but old—icy, sweet, metallic. A smell that hangs somewhere between life and memory. I knew it. Blood. But not the warm, pulsating kind. The other kind. The one that's silent.

"By Odin," murmured the one with the scar. "Something happened here."
"No," I said. "Here *happened* something else."

We entered a clearing. Three sleds, broken. Two dead horses. Men, four, five, scattered like discarded dolls. Their armor was simple—merchants, perhaps robbers, perhaps both. Everything was half-covered by snow, but the red beneath still shimmered through. Rurik went over, lifted a shield that was frozen to one hand. The fingers came free with a soft crack.

"Northmen," he said. "Wolves?" asked the youngest. Rurik shook his head. "No animal does that." I looked at the corpses. Throats slit, cleanly, precisely. No fighting. No mayhem. Just action. "That was work," I said. "What?" "The killing. Someone did it who knew how."

I felt the others fall silent behind me. I heard their thoughts without seeing them. The silence was heavy. Rurik knelt down and placed two fingers in the dried blood. "Three, four days," he murmured. I nodded. "And no one buried them. No animal ate them." "Too cold?" "No. Too scared."

The ravens perched on the branches above us. Their eyes glistened like wet stones. They looked down at me, not at the dead. I grinned. "I like your audience," I said quietly. One croaked in response. Perhaps he laughed.

I crawled to one of the bodies and turned it over. A young man, his beard frozen, his eyes open. In his hand – a knife, short, broad, the blade blunted by frost. I pulled it from his fist and held it up. "This isn't a tool," I said. "This is a memory." Rurik looked at me. "Do you want it?" "I already have it."

I scratched my palm with the tip. Not a deep cut, just enough to draw blood. It dripped onto the snow, red on white, a small, silent victory. "Why are you doing this?" asked the youngest. "So I don't forget what it smells like before it freezes."

Rurik grinned. "You're sick." "Maybe. But I'm breathing."

We searched the dead. No gold, hardly any food. Only weapons, simple things. An amulet, a coin, a broken bottle. All meaningless. But the place—the place spoke. I could hear it. It whispered of violence, of fear, of something to come. I felt it in the air. The kind of silence that builds before the sky drops something.

"We should go," said the one with the scar. Rurik nodded. "Take what you can. Then move on." I stayed behind. I looked at the bodies, at the blood, at the snow. And I suddenly understood what power was.

Power was not a sword. Not victory. Power was the right to stay when everyone else leaves.

I saw the ravens swooping down, tearing the skin of the dead. I heard the soft sound of feeding. No scream, no resistance. Only the end, so quiet it was almost beautiful. I whispered, "Eat well. I'll bring more."

Rurik called. "Ivar! Come!" I turned around and crawled up the slope. Behind me, the cracking of ravens' wings, the soft rubbing of beaks against flesh. The snow absorbed everything.

At the top of the ridge, I paused briefly. I turned around and looked down at the valley. "Blood in the snow," I murmured. "And the sky is watching." Rurik stepped beside me. "That's what life looks like, if you're honest." I nodded. "Then I want more of it."

We moved on. And every time the wind came, I thought it smelled of iron.

We continued on. No song, no prayer, not a word. Only the sound of footsteps, the rubbing of fabric, the cracking of ice under weight. The snow had grown deeper, heavier. It made no noise anymore, only resistance. I liked that. The silence was like a test, and I was the only one who wanted to pass it.

Rurik led the way, axe over his shoulder. He looked south, as if something were waiting for him down there. Perhaps he believed in destiny. I didn't. Destiny is just the word losers use when they're lucky.

The others followed, wordlessly. I was at the end of the line, but that meant nothing. Order doesn't determine power. Power lies in the gaze, not in the stride. I saw them all. Their backs, their posture, the little twitches when they were cold or doubtful. I saw when they grew weaker. I saw Rurik's pace slow. And I knew: at some point they would stop. And I would keep going.

The sky was gray, like old iron. The wind had died down, but the frost bit harder. I felt my fingers go numb, but I smiled. Pain is just proof that you still have material for legends.

After hours—or minutes, I lost count—we came to a fork. Two paths: one led further downhill, open, visible. The other narrow, hidden, between trees, with shadows that looked like they had teeth. Rurik stopped. "We should take the open path," said the one with the scar. "Open paths lead to open graves," I said.

They looked at me. Not surprised, not hostile—just silent. Men listen differently when they're exhausted. They let the words in without examining them. Rurik scratched his beard. "What do you mean?" "If I were corpses in the snow," I said, "then I'd have friends. And they'd be waiting down there." The one with the scar spat. "Or you're afraid of trees." "Fear is wise," I said. "Stupidity freezes faster."

Rurik grinned. "He's right. We'll take the narrow path." And so we walked into the shadows, and the snow beneath us was different—quieter, thicker, as if it were holding its breath. I noticed they were paying attention to me now. Not openly, not with words. But they were waiting for me to say something. I said nothing. The best way to lead is to let others believe they make their own decisions.

We walked through the trees. The branches were heavy with frost, and sometimes snow fell from above like dust from an old book. I liked the sound—the gentle *Whoosh*, which was short and final. It reminded me of knives. The

youngest cursed quietly. His hands were sore, his nose was bleeding. I handed him a piece of cloth. "Here." He took it hesitantly. "Thank you." "Don't thank me," I said. "Thank whoever stole it."

Rurik laughed. The one with the scar looked at me as if he didn't know whether to hit me or agree with me. I grinned. "Humor keeps you warm," I said. "And arrogance?" "Keeps you alive."

In the afternoon we found an abandoned fireplace. Old tracks, half-blown. Three or four men, perhaps, one night old. Rurik knelt down and examined the ashes. "They're close." I nodded. "Perhaps those who left the blood in the valley." "Or their hunters," said the one with the scar. "Or both," I said.

Rurik stood up. "We're resting here." The men began gathering wood. I crept closer to the old fire, ran my hand over the charred earth. It was still warm. I smelled it. "They're not traders," I said. Rurik turned to me. "How do you know?" "Because they ate here. They didn't use salt. Men who travel salt their meat. Men who kill eat raw."

Rurik nodded. Slowly. "How many?" "Three, maybe four. But one is leading them. One who knows what he's doing." "Like you?" I smiled. "Not yet."

The others looked at me differently after that. I saw it in their eyes—that slight tremor between fear and fascination. I was the cripple who smelled the world. I said nothing more. Words lose power when they come too often. I sat by the fire, watched the flames dance, and thought of the village, the men, the ravens. I knew now: the world was full of cripples. Some were visible. Some walked upright.

Rurik came to me later, when the others were asleep. "You have a gift," he said. "I have many curses." "Same." He sat down, staring into the embers. "If you stay, you'll learn something." "And if I leave?" "Then they'll hunt you down." "Then I'll stay."

He nodded. We said nothing more. Only the fire spoke, and it said everything. I knew I had arrived. Not home, but in the hierarchy.

Power wasn't a matter of legs. Power was a matter of gaze. And mine had become sharper.

Night came early, too early. The snow had stopped, but the cold remained like an old guilt. The fire crackled, the smoke crept under the furs, and the men sat around it, tired, quiet, half awake, half drunk. I lay a little way off, as always. I

didn't want to be with them, but I wanted them to know I was there. Proximity is a weapon, if used correctly.

Rurik barely spoke. He chewed on a piece of meat, stared into the fire, probably thinking about things that were already dead. The one with the scar—Hakon was his name, I'd overheard—couldn't stand the silence. He drank, spat, talked. Always. About women, about wars, about gods who were supposedly watching over him. I listened to him like you listen to the rain: you know it will stop eventually.

"And you, Bone Man," he cried at one point, "what do you do when you have no legs and no luck?" I looked at him. "I wait until those with legs stumble." The others laughed. Except for Rurik. He grinned, but without joy. He knew what words could do. Hakon snorted. "You talk a lot for one who crawls." "And you breathe a lot for one who says nothing."

A brief moment. Quiet, dangerous. Then Rurik laughed loudly. "Let him, Hakon. The boy bites faster than you think." "Let him bite," Hakon growled, "then he'll learn what it tastes like when a man hits back."

I straightened up, leaned on my arms, and looked at him. "You're always talking about men. Maybe you should become one."

That was it. The moment. The spark had fallen, the powder had already been there.

He jumped to his feet, staggering a little, more from the mead than from anger. His axe lay beside him, but he didn't reach for it. Not yet. Men only reach for steel after words have already struck them. He stepped toward me, bent down. I smelled him. Flesh, alcohol, fear. "Say it again," he hissed. "I said," I repeated quietly, "you talk like someone who needs it."

He raised his hand. I let it come. The blow hit me on the cheek, hard, dull. The pain was immediate, but I laughed. Loudly. Honestly. The laughter confused him. It confuses everyone. No one understands laughter in pain. "You're laughing?" "Because you agree with me."

He raised his hand again, but Rurik's voice cut in: "Enough!" Hakon stopped, breathing heavily, his mouth open, his pride shattered. I saw his fingers tremble. I could have killed him in that moment if I'd wanted to. No knife, no trick—just words. I grinned. "Thank you for the blow. I needed it. Now I feel alive again."

The others laughed nervously. Rurik didn't. He looked between us, like a man who knows there is no peace, only pauses. "Sit down, Hakon," he said calmly. Hakon obeyed, but his eyes remained on me. I looked back. No anger. Only the cold knowledge: I had broken him. Not physically, but where it's worse—in his head.

I wiped the blood from my lip, tasted it, salty, warm. I liked it. Blood is honest. It doesn't play. It reminds you that you're made of dirt, but hot dirt. "Do you know what's so great about falling?" I asked the group. No one answered. "You can hear the others running."

Silence. Then Rurik nodded slowly. "You're dangerous, boy." "No," I said. "I'm necessary."

The wind pressed against the skin hut where we were camped. Outside, a raven cried. Perhaps it was a sign. Perhaps just hunger. I lay down and closed my eyes. I knew Hakon was staring at me. I knew Rurik was thinking. And I knew that tomorrow would never be the same as today.

I had learned that authority doesn't shout. It whispers—and everyone still hears.

The morning smelled of cold ash and old anger. The fire was almost out, only a hint of embers that couldn't decide whether to live or die. I lay awake even before the first light. Sleep was for men with nothing on their minds. I had too much. I heard Hakon breathing. Heavy. Restless. His pride hadn't died last night; he had only slept. And pride always wakes up hungry.

I pretended to sleep. Rurik snored softly, the boy tossed and turned, murmuring about home, about warmth, about things that no longer had names out here. Hakon stood up. I heard the leather of his boots, the soft scrape of steel on wood. He picked up the axe. Not to chop wood. I smelled it—that scent of metal and fear that rises when someone tries to be brave.

He walked around the fire, slowly, as quietly as a man can be who thinks he's a wolf. I heard every step.

I waited. If you crawl long enough, you learn to read sounds like other words.

He stopped. I felt his shadow above me. Then he raised the axe. I rolled to the side. The blow went wide, hitting the ground, spraying snow and earth. I was faster than he thought. Always. He raised the axe, but Rurik was already awake. "Damned idiot!" he yelled. Hakon turned, but that was his mistake.

I grabbed a stick, half-burned, sharp on one side, and rammed it into the back of his knee. He fell. His scream wasn't a scream. It was the sound men make when they realize they're mortal. I was on top of him, my hands on his throat, the weight of my body like a judgment. He tried to push me away, but he'd never fought someone unafraid of pain. I squeezed. Not with hatred. With precision.

His gaze searched the sky, but there was only snow. I said quietly, "I warned you. I'm not a man to be caught in the night. I am the night."

Rurik grabbed me, pulled me back. "Enough!" I let go. Hakon wheezed, gasped, blood on his lips, but he was alive. I wiped my hands on the snow. White on red. Red on white. A pattern that never grows old.

"You could have killed him," said Rurik. "I know." "Why not?" "Because now he'll understand me."

I sat back down by the fire. The boy stared, the scar on his forehead gleaming in the twilight.

"You're sick," he whispered. I nodded. "And you're weak. We're both honest."

Rurik was silent. For a long time. Then he said, "Tell me, Ivar—what do you really want?" I stared into the embers. "That no one laughs when they see me anymore." "And if they do?" "Then I'll teach them how to unlearn it."

He nodded. No judgment, no morals. Just that quiet understanding that connects men who have already lost everything.

Hakon lay there, his leg twisted, his breath gasping. No one helped him. Not even the boy. I had broken him, like you break wood—once, and then you never hear it grow again.

Later, when the sun rose—a pale circle over a sea of snow—I saw the shadows lengthen. I knew it was the beginning of the end of their world. They thought they had me in their midst. But I was long past them. I was the frost that quietly eats through wood until everything cracks.

Rurik stepped next to me. "We'll move on as soon as he can walk." "And if he can't?" "Then he'll never move again." I grinned. "Then I'll move him."

He laughed briefly, that rough, honest laugh men have only once a month, when they forget they're going to die. "You're crazy, Ivar." "No," I said. "I'm awake."

We packed our things. I took Hakon's axe. Not because I needed it, but because it belonged to me. He looked at me, his eyes hollow, his mouth silent. I looked at him and nodded. "Now you know what it's like to fall," I said.

Then we walked. And the snow was silent. Only the crows laughed.

I knew winter hadn't defeated me. It had given birth to me. And somewhere deep within me—between pain and hunger—something greater than revenge began to grow. A will that felt like God, only more honest.

I was Ivar. And the snow beneath me was no longer cold. It was mine.

The bones that wouldn't break

They say bones are the foundation of a person. I didn't have any. At least, none that held up when it counted. But I didn't care. I had something better—a will that didn't know when to quit.

We moved on. The snow had changed. It was no longer fresh, no longer innocent. It bore traces. Ours. Old. And new. Hakon limped, his leg badly bandaged. Rurik didn't help him. Neither did I. No one helps a man who tried to kill at night. He lived—and that was punishment enough.

The boy talked less. That was good. Words are dangerous when they come without weight. Rurik hardly spoke either, but he looked at me differently now. Not as a stranger, but as something that was getting too close to him. Like a mirror that shows more than you'd like.

I crawled, as always. Slowly. Calmly. Evenly. I felt the pain in my arms, in my shoulders, in my back. But the pain was familiar, almost friendly. It told me I was still there. I grinned, sometimes for no reason. This irritated the others. It was intentional.

We passed through a narrow, rocky valley, with rocks that jutted out of the earth like old teeth. The wind whipped from the front, icy cold, like a warning. I liked that. The wind doesn't judge. It strikes everyone equally.

After hours, we stopped. The fire was slow to start, the wood damp. I blew, blew, and cursed until it finally caught fire. Hakon sat off to the side, his head

bowed. I looked at him. "Does it hurt?" He didn't answer. "Good," I said. "Then you'll learn."

Rurik watched me. "You talk like someone who thinks he's immortal." I grinned. "I haven't tried it yet." "You will. Everyone tries it once." "And?" "No one passes."

He took a sip of mead and handed me the rest. I drank. It tasted of snow and iron. "You've got something inside you," he said quietly. "Everyone has something inside them." "Yes. But yours wants to come out." I nodded. "Then let it come. I've got room."

The boy came closer, looking curiously at my hands. "How can you stand this?" "What?" "The crawling. The cold. The pain." I looked at him. "Because I've never felt better."

He didn't understand, but that didn't matter. Most people don't understand until it's too late.

Later, when they were asleep, I looked up at the sky. No stars. Only darkness, thick, endless. I whispered, "If you want to break me—try it. I've long since cracked."

I thought of the word *Bone*. As it sounds – hard, safe, whole. I thought of mine. Weak. Useless. And yet: they were still there.

I had them. I didn't need them. Maybe that was the trick. Not breaking doesn't mean being strong. Not breaking means carrying on even though you already are.

The wind died down. The fire crackled. I lay down, feeling the ground beneath me, cold and honest. I knew I was no longer an ordinary person. Not because I was stronger. But because I knew what weakness tasted like—and that it satisfies when you eat it.

I saw Hakon sleeping, his leg bandaged, his forehead covered in sweat. He was proof: pain is a teacher, not an enemy. And I was his best student.

I laughed quietly. Rurik opened one eye. "What is it?" "Nothing," I said. "Just thoughts." "About what?" "About bones. That don't want to break." "And?" "You just have to remind them long enough that they can."

He turned over, pulling the blanket tighter. I stayed awake. I counted my breaths. Each one was a victory.

And somewhere, deep within me, something new began to grow—not a hope, not a dream. Something different. Something cold. Something that doesn't break.

The day began without light. Only gray. The sky looked like a scarred back—no beginning, no end. I crawled while the others walked. It was always like this. I heard their footsteps, the dull crunch of the snow, the gasps as the cold bit into their lungs. Every breath sounded like a temporary survival. Rurik walked in front, Hakon limped; the boy carried too much, and I carried nothing—just myself. That was hard enough.

The wind came from the east, cold and patient, the kind that doesn't hate you, but tests you. It brought fine snow that crept into every fold. I pulled my cloak tighter, saw blood freezing on my hands, and grinned—even my blood wanted to stay. Rurik shouted that we needed to speed up. I just laughed. "Faster than what?" "Than the storm!" "The storm doesn't run," I said. "It waits." Storms aren't adversaries. They're judges.

Visibility worsened, whiteness everywhere. Sometimes Rurik simply disappeared from my view, then reappeared, a shadow in the snow. Hakon cursed, fell, got up again. The boy helped him until he himself fell. I crawled on, slowly, steadily, evenly. As always. Then another sound came—a crack, not of ice, but of depth. I stopped. "No further!" I cried. Rurik turned around. "Why?" "Because the earth is speaking here." Too late.

The snow broke. A slab cracked, the slope opened up. Rurik threw up his arms, Hakon screamed, the boy tumbled. I saw them fall, how a white wave swallowed them. I dug with my bare hands, cursing, coughing, feeling pressure on my chest and darkness in my head. But I laughed softly. "So it is," I whispered, "now you want me." I don't know how long I lay there. Time is only for people who can breathe. I dug, not because I thought I could get out, but because giving up was worse than suffocation.

Then light. A crack, a scream. "Here!" Rurik's hand pulled me up, rough and real. I felt the air, it tasted of death and victory. We lay side by side, gasping, half buried, half alive. The boy trembled, but he was whole. Hakon lay deeper in the snow, half buried. I saw his eyes—open, empty, finally still. "He's dead," Rurik said. I nodded. "He was already dead."

The wind died down, the silence that followed was almost tender. I looked at my hands—bloody, torn, but they held. I raised them to the light. "See, Rurik?"

He asked, "What?" I grinned. "The bones. They wouldn't break." He laughed, short and bitter. "You're crazy, boy." "No," I said. "I'm proven wrong."

We left Hakon where he fell. The snow did his job better than we could. Later, by the fire, Rurik said, "You should have died." I looked into the embers. "I already have," I answered. "Several times. Just forgot to stay put." He nodded, slowly, as if he knew it wasn't a saying, but a law. I held my hands to the fire. They were no longer shaking. And I grinned, not because I was glad to be alive, but because death is so damn disappointing when you fail again.

We found the hut in the evening. An old hunters' lodge, half-ruined, swallowed by snow. Rurik discovered it first, and I vowed never to call him an old man again. The sky hung low, the wind had finally died down, but the cold remained—thick, heavy, silent. We pushed our way inside, the boy first, Rurik behind. I crawled. The ground was frozen solid, the wood brittle, the stench old. It smelled of animal fat, smoke, and despair. I liked it. It was honest.

Rurik lit a fire. The boy fetched what was left of the provisions. I lay there, breathing, watching the smoke gather lazily under the blanket. Outside, snow fell softly. It was the first time in days that I didn't hear the wind. Only my heart, irregular, restless, like an animal too small for its cage. I took off my coat. Beneath it was my skin—scraped, blue, raw. My legs were thin, pale, useless like two dead fish. I stared at them. Sometimes I forgot they belonged to me.

Rurik looked at me. "You hate them," he said. "Who?" "Your legs." I grinned weakly. "I hate what they don't do." "And what don't they do?" "Answers." He nodded, looked into the fire. "You can live with dead things too. You just have to promise them something." "What?" "That you won't forget them."

I remained silent. I knew what he meant. Hate was a memory, and memory was all that remained when the body went on strike. I looked at my legs again. No muscles, no strength. But they were mine. I reached for them, gripped them tightly until my fingers ached. I wanted them to feel it, even if they couldn't. I whispered, "You're mine. You won't break because I say so." The boy looked at me as if I were crazy. Maybe I was. Maybe that was the trick. Only crazy people survive in a world that's constantly freezing.

Rurik brought me meat, tough but warm. I bit into it, chewed, felt the fat spread in my mouth. I ate slowly, calmly. The boy stopped talking. He looked up at Rurik, and down at me. That was good. This is how hierarchy begins. I drank water, ice-cold, with a metallic taste. Then I looked at my hands—full of cracks,

wounds, blood. I held them to the fire, and the pain was divine. It was the only thing that reminded me that I was made of something that existed.

Rurik lay down in the corner. The boy soon followed him. I stayed awake. The fire cast shadows on the walls. One looked like me—but with strong legs, a straight back, unafraid. I watched him. He stood there, in the movement of the flames, and I wondered if he was the one the world wanted to see. Maybe. But the world gets what it deserves. And it deserves me as I am—unfinished, angry, unbroken.

I thought of Mother. How she said you have to get used to the pain until it has a name. I thought mine was "Ivar." The pain was me, and I was him. We were one, like bone and skin, like fire and smoke. I smiled at the thought, leaned back, and the ground was cold, but honest.

Later, just before I fell asleep, I felt the frost creeping into my fingers. I grinned. I let it. Cold is like truth—it comes whether you want it or not. And if you feel it long enough, it doesn't hurt anymore. It becomes part of you. I looked into the fire, which crackled softly, and whispered, "I'm not breaking. I'm just relearning what is soft."

Then the snow fell more quietly, and for a moment it seemed as if I could hear my legs breathing.

I woke up before the sun did. The fire was almost out, only a remnant of embers smoldered like an old memory. The smoke still hung in the air, bitter, heavy, like the aftermath of a dream that wouldn't go away. I felt my body, every muscle, every wound. It was no longer pain, more like a silent throbbing, proof that I was still here. I turned, saw Rurik sitting, awake, still, with eyes that had seen more than one could bear.

The boy was still asleep, curled up, mouth open, like an animal that thinks the world can wait. Rurik looked at me, nodding slowly. "You survived the night," he said. I grinned. "Like every night." "Some nights, men eat." "Then I wasn't a man."

He smiled, but there was something in his gaze I recognized—respect mixed with suspicion. He realized I was no accident. He stood up, walked to the fire, and kicked the embers with his boot. "We'll move on as soon as there's enough light." I nodded and crawled to the entrance. Outside, everything was quiet. The snow had stopped. The world had been remade, cold, bare, without flaws. I liked that. A blank canvas for the mistakes yet to come.

I took a deep breath. The air was harsh, but it tasted clean. I looked at my hands. The cracks had healed, not pretty, but hard. I clenched my fists, slowly, carefully, as if I'd just gotten them. I looked at my legs, moving them slightly. No feeling, no wonder—but they were mine, and that was enough. I thought: If they don't fight for me, they'll fight against me. And one of us will survive.

Rurik came outside and stood beside me. We were silent. Men don't talk about reincarnation. They know it when they see it. "I don't know what you are," he said finally. "Me neither," I replied. "But I'll find out." He nodded, looking out over the valley. "I was thinking last night. You're not a warrior. Not a merchant. Not a jarl. But you have something they all don't." "And that would be?" "You know the ground." I grinned. "I live there."

He laughed, quietly, harshly. "Maybe sometimes men should follow someone who knows what's down there." I turned to him. "Follow? You?" He shrugged. "I'm just saying, I'll listen when you talk." I said nothing. I knew this was more than any deference. Words are cheap, but silence, which remains, is currency.

We got ready. The boy woke up, confused, shaky, but alive. We ate the last piece of meat and drank cold water. No one spoke of Hakon. Men don't bury what they want to forget. Outside, the snow glittered, hard and clean. I started crawling, slowly at first, then steadily. My arms burned, but I smiled. I felt I was stronger—not physically, but in will.

Rurik walked beside me, the boy behind him. We were not an army, not a band, not a family. We were remnants. And remnants survive everything. I thought of Mother. Of her words. Of the pain. I thought of how she had said one must learn to laugh in the storm. I did. I laughed softly, raggedly, honestly. Rurik looked at me. "What is it?" he asked. "Nothing," I said. "Just warming up."

He gave a short laugh, shaking his head, and we continued on, toward the sun, which brought little warmth, but direction. And I knew: I would never need anyone to show me the way again. For my bones may be weak, but they no longer knew any direction except forward.

The day was long, perhaps too long. The sun barely rose above the horizon, and even its light seemed tired. We walked for hours over frozen ground that answered every step like an old enemy. The snow was hard, but the wind had died down, and that made it dangerous—still snow is treacherous. I crawled, my arms sore, my fingers splayed. I felt nothing and everything at once. Rurik walked in front, as always. The boy behind him, stooped, like someone who doesn't yet know he's growing old.

In the afternoon, we found a few felled trees. The remains of an old camp. A deserted place. Wood lay around, half-rotted but usable. Rurik decided we would rest here. I nodded and sat down in the snow. My shoulders trembled. I felt my body was tired, but my mind refused to admit it. The boy made a fire, Rurik chopped wood. I watched him. Every blow was the same—powerful, precise, rhythmic. I liked the sound. It was the opposite of my life: straight, orderly, reliable.

Rurik saw me. "Do you want one too?" he asked, holding out the axe to me. I laughed. "And what should I chop—the ground?" "Wood," he said calmly. "Not because you have to, but because you can." I took it. The axe was heavy, much too heavy for me. I held it tight, raised it, the handle almost slipping from my hand. I tensed my arms, swung, and struck. The wood didn't crack. Only my back did. I cursed, tried again, and again nothing.

The boy grinned, but Rurik just shook his head. "Keep going," he said. I raised the axe, breathed, felt the trembling in my hands. Then I struck. Again. Again. At some point the wood cracked, not nicely, not quite, but real. I grinned. "See?" I said. "I can do anything if I take it long enough." Rurik laughed. "That's the only thing that matters." I kept striking, and sweat ran down my forehead. The pain came, but I let it. I wanted it. It was my proof.

Later, as the fire burned, we sat there in silence. The boy was almost asleep, his face turned to the flames. Rurik handed me a piece of bread. I took it, chewing slowly. "You'll get stronger," he said. "Only when I allow myself." "That's the right answer." He looked at me, serious. "Do you know why men die?" "Because they must?" "No. Because they think they can." I nodded. I understood him. Death is not an enemy. It is an offer. And I had learned to refuse.

Later that night, while Rurik slept, I looked at my hands. Blisters, cracks, blood. I smelled them. They smelled of metal, of work, of me. I reached for the axe and laid it beside me, like an animal tamed, but only for me. I whispered, "If I run one day, it won't be because I want to. But because no one will believe it." I lay down, staring into the darkness that hung over me like a blanket of smoke. I knew I was becoming something—not stronger, not better, but clearer.

The snow outside began to fall again. Slowly, quietly, evenly. I heard it on the roof, and it sounded like breathing. And I knew that was the world—cold, heavy, indifferent. And I was the opposite: small, warm, defiant. I smiled into the darkness. I thought: If the world is a storm, I am the stone that remains.

I slept restlessly. The wind had shifted and was now blowing from the north, soft, cold, but heavy. The fire was almost out, and darkness crept over me like an animal rediscovering an old haunt. I lay still, listening to the creaking of the beams, the rustling of the snow outside. I felt my body as one feels a burden that one must carry, even though it belongs to them. My muscles twitched, my joints burned. I thought: If pain is a song, I know every line.

At some point, I drifted off, half dream, half fever. I saw nothing, only blackness. Then came the sound—a dull throbbing, deep, slow, like footsteps beneath the skin. I knew what it was. My bones. They didn't speak, they didn't complain. They told stories. They said: *We are still here.* And I answered in the dream: *I know.* Said: *You hated us.* I nodded. *Because you betrayed me.* No, they said, *You never understood us. We were never strong. You were.*

I laughed in my sleep, quietly, harshly. "You are the remnants of something that is fighting back." *That's why we belong to you,* they said. *Not because you need us, but because you carry us.* I wanted to get up, but in the dream I had legs, strong legs, and that was worse than any reality. I walked. The ground was hard, the sky gray, and I heard every step sound like glass. I saw no people, no trees, no tracks—only myself, the shadow of a body that had to prove itself.

Then I fell. No pain, only silence. I landed on something soft—snow, perhaps, or a memory. I saw my hands, and they were made of bone, shiny, white, beautiful. I reached for them, wanted to squeeze them, but they didn't break. They held. And I realized: That was it. I was never the lame one. I was the one who stayed.

I woke up, drenched in sweat, panting. The fire was out. The sky outside glowed in pale morning light. Rurik was still asleep, the boy snoring softly. I sat up, feeling my body tremble, but not with fear—with life. I stretched my arms, took a deep breath. The air was icy cold, but it burned well. I looked at my legs, motionless, unfamiliar, and said quietly, "I hate you. And that's exactly what keeps us together."

I crawled outside. The snow was soft, fresh, as if the world had been remade. I put my hands into it, feeling the cold immediately grip, bite, burn. I let it. I wanted it to bite me. I grinned. Ravens cawed in the distance, and I swore I heard them laughing. I said out loud, "Go ahead and laugh. I'm not breaking. I'm just growing differently."

Rurik came outside shortly after, rubbed his beard, and saw me sitting there. "No sleep again?" he asked. "I was sleeping," I said. "Just somewhere else." "So? What did you find there?" I looked at him. "Me."

He nodded, said nothing. Men like him understand sentences that aren't finished. We packed up, the boy blinked sleepily, and we moved on, away from the hut, into a new patch of white. I felt my hands grow firmer, my breathing calmer.

I knew the body was my enemy—but one I had defeated by keeping it. I was Ivar. No miracle, no curse. Just a human who hadn't forgotten that weakness feels better when worn like armor.

And somewhere, deep beneath the skin, the pounding continued—quiet, steady, defiant. It wasn't a heartbeat. It was a memory.

Mother and the pain

I remember Mother. Not her face, not really. Just her hands. Cold, always cold, like stone left in water too long. They smelled of metal and ash, never flowers. When she touched me, it was never tenderness, but control. She wanted to know if I was still breathing. Not because it mattered to her, but because she needed to know if her curse still lived. I was her memorial, her guilt in the flesh. And maybe that's why she loved me—because I stayed when everything else left her.

The house was small, crooked, somewhere on the edge of Kattegat. The wind blew through the roof, the smoke from the fire never really dissipated. We coughed more than we talked. I lay in my corner, my legs wrapped in fabric she'd cut from old clothes. She called it warmth. I called it camouflage. If I stayed quiet, she sometimes forgot I was there. I often heard her murmuring, in the dark, talking to herself, to the gods, to what she called "the punishment." I was that punishment.

Once I asked her, "Why me?" She was silent. Then she laughed, dry, short, almost like a cough. "Because gods don't make mistakes, boy." I knew that was a lie. I saw it in her eyes when she thought I was asleep. She drank. A lot. Mead, beer, sometimes something she mixed from herbs. She said it kept the cold away. But it was the cold she drank, day after day.

I remember her voice, hard, broken, like wood bent too often. She cursed a lot, about life, about men, about the sea. And sometimes, very rarely, about me. When she was angry, she called me "that thing." When she was sober, she called me "my blood." I didn't know which was worse.

I was small, weak, but not stupid. I knew she hated and protected me at the same time. Once a man, a merchant, came drunk, with a sack of flour on his back. He laughed when he saw me and said something about lame children and useless women. I remember how Mother remained silent, how she put down the mead cup, stood up, and put the blade to his throat. No anger, no haste. Just that look—the one that said: One more word and you'll meet the right god. The man left, and she sat down again, continued drinking as if nothing had happened. She looked at me. "No one calls you a cripple," she said. I didn't believe her, but I wanted to.

Sometimes she cried at night. Quietly, so I barely heard. I pretended to be asleep because I knew that pity was more dangerous than hunger. Sometimes she spoke to Father, even though he'd been dead for a long time. I didn't know if she saw him or imagined him. Maybe both. I never asked her about it. I learned early on that questions are like knives: If you draw them wrong, they'll cut you.

I remember the smell—smoke, sweat, cold stone. And her eyes when she looked at me, like someone who's lost something and doesn't know if they'll ever find it again. I think she saw her own failure in me. I was proof that strength isn't inherited. But maybe I was also the reason she didn't give up. I was her cage, but also her witness.

One night, as the wind howled and the fire flickered, she came to me and placed her hand on my forehead. "You'll never walk," she said. "But you'll do more than those who can." I didn't understand what she meant. Only later, much later, when the blood and snow mingled, did I know: She was right.

I think of her often. Not with love, not with hate. With weight. She was the beginning of pain, but also the one who taught it to me. Without her, I might have learned to walk—but never how to fall and get up again, without legs.

Mother had her own laws. None that could be written down, none that could be understood. She didn't speak them, she showed them. And if you didn't understand them, it hurt. That's how you learned. I learned early on that hunger has a language. When there was nothing to eat, she would say, "The body forgets quickly, but the will never." I didn't believe her, but my stomach

did. I lay in my corner, the fire small, the wind loud, and she just sat there, drinking, staring into the flames. I once asked her why she didn't just kill me. She looked at me for a long time without blinking. "Because you remind me," she said. "And I need that." I didn't know what she meant, but I sensed it was true.

When I cried, she laughed. Not out of cruelty, but because she couldn't help it. She said tears were like blood—not to be wasted. So I cried secretly, quietly, at night, wrapped in furs, until it hurt to breathe. One night, she caught me. Not a word, not a blow. Just that look that said it all: *You are losing something that you cannot get back.* I stopped crying. For years.

She talked to me as if I were an adult. No stories, no songs, no gods. Only truths that hurt. "The world owes you nothing," she said. "No one will carry you. So learn to pull." I didn't understand, but I nodded, because children nod when they don't want to die. Later, I understood. She was right. No one carries you. And whoever tries will eventually let you fall.

She made me do things no child should have to do. Fetch wood, carry water, wash animal hides. I could barely grip, but she said, "If it's impossible, do it anyway. Otherwise your body will learn to say no." I hated her for it. I loved her for it. I still don't know. But I did what she asked. If I fell, she waited until I crawled again. No consolation, no praise, just that nod. I think that was her kind of pride.

She rarely spoke of my father. Only once, when she was drunk, did she say, "He was strong. But he had no backbone." I didn't know at the time that she meant both—literally and metaphorically. Perhaps that's why I was her antithesis. I had no physical framework, so I needed one in my head. And she built it for me. Brick by brick, blow by blow.

One winter morning, when I was maybe six, she left me lying outside. No blanket, no fire. Just snow and sky. "If you're cold, move," she said. "If you die, then it wasn't enough." She left. I stayed. I didn't know how long. The wind came, the cold bit. I breathed shallowly, slowly. I watched the clouds move. I felt the frost in my fingers. And at some point, when everything fell silent, I felt something burning inside me. Not fire, not madness—something else. The will not to agree with her. I swore I would live just to annoy her.

Later, when she returned, she looked at me, examining me. Not a word. Just that brief twitch in her face, which was perhaps a smile. "Good," she said.

"You're learning." I nodded. I had learned that warmth has nothing to do with temperature.

I grew in this silence. No praise, no shouting. Just this cold school of survival. I learned that pain was a tool. Not an enemy, not a friend. Something to hold on to when you lose everything else. I learned that compassion is the beginning of the end. Those who feel sorry for themselves stop breathing.

Today, when I think of her, I know: She wasn't a monster. Just someone who had learned that love is dangerous. And she wanted to protect me—not from the world, but from the desire that she could be gentle.

I remember the night Mother showed me what death is. It was winter, deeper than snow should be. The fire was barely burning, the wind was coming through the roof, and outside you could hear the animals screaming. One of the goats was sick, had been lying on its side all day. I looked at it, saw how it was breathing—heavily, irregularly, as if it had to apologize for every breath. I said to Mother, "She's dying." She nodded. "Then watch." I didn't understand. She fetched the knife. It was the large one, with the notch in the handle, the one Father had used once before he disappeared.

She went to the animal, crouched down, and stroked its neck. It was almost gentle. Then she cut. No flinch, no scream. Just that soft, wet sound when life is taken away. The blood flowed slowly, dark, warm, onto the cold ground. I smelled it, felt it in my mouth, even though I didn't drink it. It smelled of iron, of warmth, of something more honest than words.

I wanted to look away, but she said, "Stay." I stayed. I saw the goat's eyes still, the body twitch, the silence that followed, louder than anything before. Mother looked at me. "This is what it looks like when the world does what it wants." I nodded, even though I didn't understand. I saw the blood in her hands, dripping, and asked, "Does it hurt?" She laughed. "Not when you do it yourself."

She put down the knife, wiped her hands on her apron, and looked at me for a long moment. "Come here," she said. I crept closer. She took my hand, guided it to the animal, into the warm blood. I pulled back at first, but she held on. "Touch it," she said. I did. The blood was warm, alive, almost friendly. "This is life," she said. "And this is what remains, if you can." I looked at my fingers, red all the way to the nails, and asked, "Why show them?" She looked at me. "Because you have to understand that nothing is free. Not pain, not hunger, not death. Everything has to be paid for."

I think that was the first time I felt something change inside me. No shock, no trauma, just this quiet transition from child to animal. I smelled my hand, the blood slowly getting colder. It smelled of mother, of home, of the world. I realized that life is not the opposite of death. It's just what happens between two pains.

Later, as she was cutting the meat, she said, "Some kill because they have to. Others because they know they can." I asked, "And you?" She replied, "I do it so you can learn." I nodded. I understood enough to know that this was love—her version of it.

I washed my hands in the snow, watched the water turn pink. I liked the color. It was the most authentic color I knew. I crawled back into the house and lay down in my corner. Mother was sitting by the fire again, drinking and staring. I looked at her for a long time. She noticed, turned to me, and said quietly, "If you're crying, it's only because you remember what it was like before you became strong."

I fell asleep with the smell of blood in my nose, and in the darkness I thought maybe that was the moment I stopped being a child.

I grew older without realizing it. You don't grow when you crawl—you shed your skin. Mother noticed it first. Not because I grew taller, but because I started talking when I should have kept quiet. I used to devour her sentences, swallowing every word like medicine. Now I tasted the bitter residue that remained. She saw it in my eyes. She didn't like it.

One morning, the snow had melted and the roof was dripping, she sat at the table, drinking and staring into space. I asked her, "Why do you hate everything?" She looked at me, slowly, languidly, as if she needed to remember who I was. "Because everything passes," she said. I shook my head. "Then hate me. I'll stay." She laughed, harshly, honestly, but without joy. "Watch out, boy. Pride is like fire—warm at first, ashes at the end." I said, "Then I'll learn to live with ashes."

Since then, things have been different between us. Not bad, just different. She talked less, I talked more. She looked at me as if searching for something in my face she'd lost. Maybe hope. Maybe just peace. I didn't know. I once asked her if she loved me. She didn't answer right away. Then she said, "Love is for those who have time." I nodded. "Then you hate me?" "No," she said. "I just remind you too often."

I began to see things differently. If she gave me work, I did it, but I asked why. She didn't like that. "You think too much," she said. "Thinking makes you weak." I said, "Not thinking kills you." She hit me there for the first time. No anger, no outburst—a movement, calm, precise, like a reflex. I didn't fall. I laughed. She looked at me, and for a moment, there was pride. "Good," she said. "Then you'll finally learn how to answer back."

I watched her more and more as I grew older. Her hands, which trembled when she wasn't drinking. Her shoulders, which grew heavier and heavier. I saw anger eating away at her, and I knew: If I stay, I'll become like her. If I leave, I'll become worse. I asked her one evening which is stronger—the body or the will. She said: "The body dies first. The will follows, if you let it." I remained silent. I knew I would never let him.

Sometimes I saw her standing at the door at night, barefoot in the snow, her eyes wide open, as if waiting for someone. I asked her who. "No one," she said. "And that's the problem." She turned to me, smiling wearily. "You want to know why you're alive, don't you?" I nodded. "Because you can," she said. "And when you stop, never ask yourself why again."

I think that was the moment I understood that pain is an inheritance. It's not something you're given. You're born into it. I looked at her, this woman who was more stone than human, and I swore to myself that I wouldn't break, no matter what. Not because I was strong. But because she was.

We didn't speak the next night. But she sat down next to me by the fire without saying anything. I felt her closeness, felt the trembling of her fingers that she wanted to hide. I pretended not to notice. And that was perhaps the closest we ever came to tenderness.

It was late. The fire was almost out, the wind scratching at the wall like an animal trying to get in. Mother sat there, as always, cup in hand, her gaze somewhere between smoke and memory. I had grown older, stronger in the upper body, harder in the face. I spoke less often, but when I did, it no longer sounded like a child. It was a night like any other, until I asked her, "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

She blinked as if she'd forgotten the word. "What?" "The drinking. The waiting. The silence." She laughed, quietly, raggedly. "Because it's easier than living." "Then stop telling me I should learn," I said.

That was new. I had never interrupted her before. She looked at me, slowly, with that look that could turn men into children. But not this time. This time I stayed. I looked back. "You talk a lot for someone who crawls," she said. "And you drink a lot for someone who stands," I replied.

Silence. Only the crackling of the embers. I knew I'd gone too far, but I wanted to. I wanted to know what would happen when she no longer saw me as a child. Her face hardened, not angry, just old. She put the cup down, slowly, with control. "I raised you, even though you remind me of my mistake every day," she said. "I am not a mistake," I said. "I am what you make of mistakes."

She stood up, swaying slightly, and came closer. I smelled the mead, the smoke, the tiredness. She crouched down in front of me, and for a moment I thought she was going to hit me. But she didn't. She looked into my eyes, for a long time. "You are my mirror," she said softly. "And I hate mirrors." "Then break me," I said. "I won't break."

She stared at me, breathing heavily. Her hands trembled, and she raised them, but not to strike. She let them fall. For the first time, I saw her weak. Not tired—empty. "You're not like me," she said finally. "No," I said. "I'm worse."

She laughed. It wasn't a laughter that had life, but one that came from within, from a place where only memory still resides. She sat back down, picked up the cup, drank, and didn't look at me again. "Then at least survive better than I did," she said. "I intend to."

I crawled back into my corner. The fire was almost out, but I felt heat. Not from outside—from within. Pride, guilt, triumph, all at once. I had defeated them, but it didn't feel like it. It felt like I had broken something that was never whole.

She didn't speak again all night. Only once, just before morning, did I hear her murmur. I barely understood the words. Perhaps a prayer. Perhaps a curse. Perhaps both. I turned over, closed my eyes, and thought: I have her voice. I have her anger. And now both are mine.

When I woke up in the morning, she was silent. I didn't know if she was asleep or just didn't want to go on. I got up, crawled to the fire, and added more wood. I looked at her. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't seeing me—she was seeing through me. And I knew that was it. The pain had won. And I was proof that it would stay.

I sat there for a long time without speaking. I could have cried, but I didn't. I knew she would have hated that. Instead, I whispered, "I'll keep studying." Then I took the cup, drank the last of the mead, and it tasted like her—bitter, strong, and honest.

The morning smelled of smoke, the cold taste of ash, mixed with something I only later understood—death. I woke up, the fire was out, the wind blew through the cracks, softly, almost politely. Mother was still sitting there, as she had been the night before, only more silent. Her eyes open, but aimless. I knew immediately. I didn't need a pulse, a scream, or proof. The body knows when something's missing.

I crept closer and looked at her for a long time. No drama, no crying. Just this strange feeling that the world had become a little quieter. I touched her hand. Cold. Stone. I thought: This is how eternity begins—not with light, but with silence. I sat down next to her and looked into the empty fireplace. There was still some ember there, right at the bottom, hidden under gray ash. I poked around in it, found a flame, small, defiant, just right. I smiled.

"You would have liked that," I said. No answer, of course not. But I kept talking. "You taught me not to ask. I will keep it. I will not weep for you, nor mourn for you. I will take you with me, just as you left me—half-baked, but alive." I stood up, slowly, carefully, my arms heavy, my body tired. I walked to the door, looked out. The snow was fresh, smooth, clean. I liked that. A world without traces.

I turned around again, saw her sitting there—as if she were just thinking, as if death were just an idea she was briefly testing. I whispered, "I hate you. But you were everything." Then I left. I took nothing with me, except the knife. The old one with the notch. Her knife. That was enough.

Outside, the air was clear, icy cold. I crawled through the snow, slowly, calmly. A trail remained behind me, narrow but real. I thought of her words: "Love is for those who have time." I grinned. "I have time, Mother. I only have you." The wind blew in my face, sharp, honest. I let it. I wanted it.

I crawled until the house shrank, until it disappeared into the white. I stopped briefly, looked back. No more smoke. No more sound. Only emptiness. I nodded. This was better. You can't lose something you've already buried.

I thought of her hands, the cold, the night with the goats, everything she had taught me. I felt she had been right. Pain was not an enemy. Pain was

structure. Without it, you fall apart. I breathed deeply, and the cold cut through my lungs like glass. I liked the feeling. I was alive.

Somewhere far above me, a raven screeched. I looked up. Black wings against the gray sky. I nodded. "Tell her she made it," I murmured. The bird circled as if it had heard me and flew on. I laughed. Briefly, quietly, almost friendly. Then I crawled on, away from Mother, away from the house, away from everything called childhood.

I knew I was alone now. But it didn't feel empty. It felt clean. No pity, no burden, no faith. Just cold, hunger, and the will to never stand still again. I said out loud, "You won, Mother." And more quietly, "But so did I."

Night came quickly. No fire, no roof, just snow and a sky that looked as if someone had extinguished all life. I had no direction, no plan, only the urge not to look back. I crawled on until my arms burned, until I could no longer feel the ground. I found a hollow in the snow, half-protected by rocks, crawled inside, and lay there. The wind whistled over me, but it left me alone. Like everything that doesn't want anything.

I lay there and looked up at the sky. The stars looked like holes in something larger. I wondered if they were there to remind us, or just to show how small we are. I thought of Mother. Of her face, which I could never fully retain. Of her voice, of her cold hands. I almost heard her saying, "Pain is your teacher." And I answered into the night, "I'm listening."

I was hungry. Not for food—for meaning. For the feeling that everything that had happened was leading somewhere. But I knew that was a lie. Nothing leads anywhere. You go because you have to. And eventually, you stay because you want to. I pulled her coat tighter around me, smelled her in it, the smoke, the mead, the anger. It smelled like home. I smiled.

The snow fell softly, like dust on an old book. I saw my hands, bloody, cracked, but real. I moved them slowly, felt the cracking in the joints. Every movement was proof. I whispered, "I am here." And that was enough. No God, no witness, no comfort. Just this. Me, breath, cold.

In the distance, I heard wolves. They were calling, as they always do—not out of hunger, but to remind themselves that they're alive. I understood that. I didn't roar, I laughed. A quiet, hoarse laugh that drowned in the snow. I knew I wasn't one of them. But I wasn't human anymore either. Something in between. A remnant.

I turned on my side, pulled my coat up to my chin. The wind died down. I closed my eyes and felt my breath forming steam that immediately vanished. That's how it is with everything. Life, love, mother. Everything evaporates. Only pain remains. But it's warm if you hold it close enough. I held it tight. I fell asleep with it.

In my dream, I saw Mother. Not cold, not harsh. Calm. She stood there, barefoot in the snow, and said, "Now you belong to you." I nodded. And when I woke up, the sky was already gray, the cold new, and I knew she was right.

I crawled on, aimless, fearless. I felt my heart beating calmly, regularly, defiantly. I thought: I am what she hated. And what she built. Both. And that's enough.

Hunger for greatness

I was no longer a child, but not yet a man. I was something in between, raw, unfinished, half human, half will. The days blended into one another: snow, wind, hunger. I no longer knew how long I had been alone. At some point, you lose track, when you no longer hear any voices but your own. You talk to the wind, and when it answers, you believe it.

I found the village by chance. Smoke in the distance, faint but real. I crept closer, slowly, cautiously, like an animal that has forgotten what trust is. When I arrived, I saw them: people. Men, women, children. They looked like they belonged together, and that made me nervous. I had been alone for too long. Togetherness reeked of danger.

An old man saw me first. He stared as if he'd seen a ghost. I grinned. "I'm not one," I said. "Not yet." He called out to others. Soon they were standing around me. Cutting glances, whispering words. One laughed, that short, sharp sound that was more fear than mockery. I knew it well. It was the world's greeting to strangers.

A woman brought water. I drank, slowly, carefully, like an animal from a bowl. She asked, "Where are you from?" I looked at her. "From downstairs," I said. She laughed uncertainly. "You talk funny." "I think differently," I said. She nodded, as if she didn't know whether to believe it or forget it.

She offered me food, bread, hard but real. I bit into it, chewed, tasted salt, flour, life. I had forgotten what that was like – food that wasn't pain. I looked at the others, how they studied me, how they whispered. I heard words like *crippled, mutilated, poor thing* I smiled. Pity was worse than hate.

"What are you staring at?" I asked loudly. Silence. Only the crackling of the fire. Then someone said, "What are you?" I grinned. "Alive."

They didn't know what to do with me. I wasn't a beggar, an enemy, or a hero. Just something that didn't fit the mold. I stayed on the sidelines, as always. I saw their faces, the tiredness in them, the little lies they used to stay awake. I didn't like them. I envied them a little. Not their warmth, but their illusions.

At night, they gave me a place with the animals. I smelled of straw, of dirt, of home. I lay there, hearing their voices from the huts, the laughter, the crying, the whispering. I knew this was what Mother had warned me about—closeness. I turned over, closed my eyes, but I couldn't sleep.

Something I didn't recognize was growing inside me. Not a hunger for food, not a need for rest. It was bigger. Deeper. A turmoil in my blood. I wanted more. Not warmth. Not safety. Something different. Something that hurt, but made sense. I wanted them to know my name. Not out of pity. Out of fear.

I saw my hands in the moonlight, full of cracks, scars, and marks. I whispered, "Greatness is not a gift. It is taken." The wind didn't answer. It didn't have to. I knew it agreed.

In the morning, the village smelled of smoke and fish. I woke up in the stable, wrapped in a blanket that smelled more like animal than human. Outside, a rooster crowed, as if complaining about the world. I pulled myself up, slowly, arms trembling, back stiff. My body didn't do what I wanted, but it still obeyed—that was enough.

I crawled out and saw men around the fire, women washing, children playing as if winter didn't exist. One of the men saw me. "You can stay if you work," he said. I nodded. "I can do anything poor people do." They laughed. I didn't laugh.

He gave me an axe. "Chop wood," he said. I took it. The handle was smooth, the blade blunt. I took off my coat and sat down next to the woodpile. The men stopped, wanting to watch. I knew why. Pity always seeks entertainment. I grabbed the wood, raised the axe, and struck. The first blow was weak. The

second was better. With the third, it fell. Not pretty, not cleanly, but it fell. I grinned.

One said quietly, "He can do something after all." "More than you think," I said.

I continued hacking, hour after hour. My fingers numb, my back sore, my knees in the dirt. But I didn't stop. I wanted them to see. To know I wasn't a beggar, not a cripple, not a shadow. I was flesh that refused to rot.

When I was finished, the pile stood tall and neat. The man came back and picked up the axe. "Good," he said. "You'll get food." "I don't want a present," I said. "It isn't one," he said. I nodded. That was the first thing I believed him.

Later, at dinner, they sat together, laughing, drinking. I sat a little way off, bread in hand, soup in a cup. A boy came up, maybe thirteen, cheeky, with a face that had never seen a beating. He looked at me, grinned. "My mother says gods punish those they hate." I looked at him, still chewing. "Then your god hates himself, boy."

He didn't know what to say. I grinned, not angrily, just tiredly. "Learn to keep your mouth shut before someone shows you how." He ran away. The adults looked at me, unsure whether to laugh or avoid me. I looked into the flames. Fire doesn't judge. It consumes.

Later, the woman who had given me water came over. She sat down next to me. "You're different," she said. "I'm left over," I said. "Some call that bad luck." "I call it training."

She smiled, sad and warm at the same time. "What do you want, stranger?" I looked at her. "Everything." She remained silent. People who have never gone hungry don't understand that word.

I couldn't sleep that night. I lay there, listening to the wind through the rooftops. I thought about her question. What do I want? I didn't want to live. I didn't want to die. I wanted weight. I wanted everyone who heard my name to pause for a moment. I wanted size. Not the kind you get. The kind you take.

I saw my hands. Cracked, sore, real. I held them over my chest, felt my heartbeat, slow, hard, reliable. I said softly, "One day her laughter will sound like fear." Then I turned around, closed my eyes, and dreamed of fire—not of death, but of the beginning.

The next day was brighter, but colder. The sun hung low, the air smelled of salt and iron. I sat at the edge of the village square, eating a piece of bread, slowly, as always. The men were preparing for the hunt, women were carrying nets to the river. I watched them as one watches animals. I didn't want to be part of it, but I wanted them to know I was there.

One of the men, tall, broad, with those hands that hit more than hold, came up to me. He'd seen me chopping wood yesterday. He grinned, but not in a friendly way. "Show me, lame man," he said, "how you eat." He reached for my bread. I held onto it. "Leave it." He laughed, louder, more foolishly. "Or what?" I looked at him. "Or you'll learn that weakness has teeth."

He bent down, trying to snatch it from me. I let him come closer, then I grabbed him. Not the way a fighter grabs, but like an animal. I grabbed his ankles, yanking him off balance. He fell because he wasn't expecting it. I pulled him down, and he tumbled to the ground. I crawled toward him, quickly, before he realized it, and punched him. Not a punch—I took the hard part of my forehead and rammed it into his face. Blood. Warm, real, red. His scream was short, then just breath.

The others watched. No one intervened. Pity attracts spectators, violence silences them. I held him tight, pressed my hand against his throat. He struggled, but he was surprised, unprepared. I bent down. "I'm not a cripple," I said quietly. "I'm a memory." He gasped. "Let..." I pressed harder, then let go, stood up, or rather, pulled myself up as far as I could.

He lay there, gasping, bleeding, more frightened than hurt. I picked up my bread and wiped the blood from my hands. "I told you," I said. I turned to the others. "Anyone else who wants to learn?" Silence. Only the crackling of the fire and the wind beating against the roofs.

The woman who had brought me water was standing nearby. She looked at me, not with fear, but with that strange look that asks if you've just seen something bigger than you want to comprehend. I looked back. "That's how it goes," I said. She nodded slowly. "You're dangerous." I grinned. "No. I'm just done waiting."

The man got up, spat blood, and said nothing. He left. I knew he wouldn't laugh anymore. Not at me. And the others? They looked away. No more whispering. No more "the lame one." Just that short, hard look people give when they know: Here's someone who doesn't fit into their routine.

Later, as I sat back in the stable, my arms trembled. Not from fear. From something else. Pride. Hunger. I knew I'd started something. Something that wouldn't stop once it got going. I said quietly to myself, "This is the beginning." And I smiled. Not a pretty smile. A real one.

Since the incident, they've avoided me. No more mockery, no laughter, no words. Just those brief, measured glances that say: *Leave him alone, or you'll become like the other one.* I liked the silence. Silence is more honest than false friendliness. It says what words dare not.

The next day, the man from the day before brought me a piece of meat. Not a word, not a look. He put it down and left. I grinned. This is what peace looks like, I thought. Not out of respect, but out of fear. And fear is a beginning. I ate slowly, savoring every bite. It wasn't the meat that filled me, but the feeling of finally having a place—even if it was one no one wanted.

Later, the old man from the village came to me, with a gray beard, shoulders hunched, but eyes that still glowed. "You made an impression," he said. I looked at him. "I was hungry." He nodded. "Hunger is good. Men without hunger are already half dead." I grinned. "Then I'm alive." "Perhaps too much," he said. "But we need men like you. The winter will be harsh, and men who bite don't die so easily."

He wanted to keep me. I knew it wasn't an offer made out of kindness, but out of necessity. I was a tool. Strong enough to be useful, scary enough to keep my distance. But that was enough for me for now. He said, "You'll get food and a place to stay. In return, you'll help when we need you." I nodded. "I'll help if it makes sense." He laughed, short, ragged. "Make sense? You make that sense yourself, boy." Then he left.

I stayed behind, saw the smoke over the village, the gray huts, the tired faces. Everything inside me told me this wasn't my place. I didn't fit into this order of work, obedience, and belief in gods. I was too raw, too loud, too hungry. But I knew: you stay until you've learned enough to move on. Mother had done it that way. Me too.

The woman came back later, bringing me bread and a piece of fur. "For the night," she said. I nodded. "Thank you." She stopped for a moment, looked at me. "Why are you looking at the others like that?" I grinned. "Because I want to know how much of a human being they are." "And what do you see?" "Fear. And habit. They both smell the same."

She said nothing. She laid down the fur and left. I watched her. She walked upright, calmly, with a step that spoke louder than words. I liked her. Not because she was friendly. But because she didn't pretend to be scared.

That night, I sat by the fire again, alone. I thought of the village, of Mother, of Rurik, of everyone who had left. I thought that I was here because I had survived—not because I wanted to belong. I said quietly to myself, "I'll stay until they fear me. Then I'll go."

The wind blew through the cracks, the fire crackled, and dogs barked outside. I smiled. I had learned that greatness doesn't come from above. It grows from below, from hunger, from pain, from staying still, until the moment comes when you simply stand up—and no one dares to ask you why.

They wanted me to come along. I didn't know if it was courage or stupidity. Probably both. The old man came early in the morning. "We're going hunting," he said. "You're coming with us." I nodded. No questions. I didn't need an invitation. I wanted to see blood, not out of anger, but out of that quiet, clear hunger for movement.

There were five of us men, and I. They carried spears, bows, and knives. I carried an old axe. The snow was deep, the light harsh. We walked in silence, only breathing, footsteps, and metal. I crawled alongside, fast, steady. I wasn't slower, just different. They saw it, but said nothing.

After hours, we found tracks—wild, large, fresh. The old man raised his hand, and everyone stopped. He nodded to me. I understood. We should drift. The others went left, I stayed right. The snow was softer there, and I glided almost silently. I saw the movement first: a deer, large, calm, beautiful. I saw him, and something inside me laughed. I knew they would hunt him like men hunt—with respect. I hunted him like someone who knows that respect makes you hungry.

I crawled closer, took the axe, waited until he noticed me. When he did, it was too late. He ran, and I threw. Not a clean throw, not a hunter's throw. Crude, instinctive. But the axe hit. Not the head, not the heart, but the neck. He didn't fall immediately; he wheezed. I crawled over, quickly, panting, and squeezed his throat until he was still. No scream, no trembling, just the heavy, warm feeling of the end.

The men came. They saw me, the blood, the body. One said, "By the gods." I laughed. "They had nothing to do with it." The old man looked at me, long and calm. "You did it with your hand?" I nodded. "I was closer than you."

We cut the meat, shared it, and carried it back. No one spoke until we reached the village. They hung up the game and sang their short song of thanks. I stood by, watching. I didn't understand the song. I understood hunger.

Later, by the fire, they came to me. The man I had knocked to the ground nodded at me. Not hatred. Something else. Recognition. I grinned. "Tastes better when you kill it yourself," I said. He replied, "Tastes of guilt." I shook my head. "Guilt is for people who are full."

The woman came back and brought me water. "You killed," she said. "We all kill." "But you liked it," she said. I looked at her. "I liked that it was real."

That night I couldn't sleep. I saw the deer in front of me, the eyes, the final trembling. No feeling of remorse. Only this clear, honest knowledge that I was alive because I had finished something else. I thought of Mother. I heard her say: *If you see blood, take it seriously.* I nodded into the darkness. "I'm serious, Mother."

I saw my hands, still smeared, dried red in the cracks. I rubbed them on my coat, but the blood didn't completely go away. I grinned. It belonged to me now. And I knew I'd found something greater than pity, greater than pain.

I had smelled power. And it smelled of iron.

The meat hung over the fire, the smoke rose in gray spirals, and the stench of fat and smoke hung heavy in the air. The men drank, sang, laughed. I sat a little way off, legs tucked under me, axe beside me, silent. They clinked cups together, patted each other on the back, told the same stories they did every night. Of heroic deeds, of women, of victories that might never have happened. I listened. I understood why they were talking. If you're nothing, you must at least be loud.

One sang loudly, off-key, but with fervor. The others roared along. I grinned. I thought maybe this was their way of praying—drunk, loud, and afraid that the next day would make them forget. I didn't drink. I didn't like the taste, and I liked forgetting even less. I wanted to keep everything, every image, every pain, every sound. Forgetting was for those who were afraid to remember.

The man I had hit eventually came over. He sat down and held out a mug to me. "Drink," he said. "We're celebrating you." I looked at him. "Me?" "You brought us meat." I took the mug and smelled it. "You're celebrating because you're full, not because I'm strong." He grinned crookedly. "Doesn't matter,

does it?" I shook my head. "For you, maybe." I took a sip and put the mug down. The mead burned, but not enough to feel anything.

He looked at me and nodded slowly. "You're not like us." "No," I said. "I'm like me." "What does that mean?" I grinned. "I stay awake when you sleep."

He laughed, stood up, and went back to the others. I stayed seated, staring into the embers. The sparks rose high, dissipated in the wind. I thought of Mother, of Rurik, of the deer, of all the blood that now lay somewhere in the earth. Everything dead, but nothing gone. That's how life works. You become part of what consumes you.

I added wood, slowly, deliberately. The sky was clear, full of stars, cold and vast. I liked the feeling of being small. It calmed me. I saw my hands, still slightly reddish with blood. I turned them in the embers. I said quietly, "I'm growing bigger. Not because I want to. Because it's happening."

Behind me, they laughed, loudly, drunkenly, happily. I thought: Happiness is just a lid on fear. Take it off, and everything will come pouring out. I felt I couldn't drink like them. I was sober on principle. I didn't want to forget anything. Every painful moment was food. I lived off it.

At some point, they slept, one after the other, in the straw, in the dirt, in their breath. I stayed awake. I looked at them, those bodies, soft, inert, empty. I thought: These aren't men. These are pauses between deaths. I smiled. Not arrogantly. Just knowingly.

I took my axe and held it in the fire until it glowed. I saw the metal turn red, how it breathed. I understood. I was like that. Cold until I was heated. Then hot until everything burned. I lowered the axe and watched the steam rise. I said quietly, "Hunger makes you honest."

Then I lay down, my head against the wood, the sky above me, and I knew, while they were all dreaming, that I wasn't allowed to sleep. Not because I was afraid. But because I knew that if you sleep too long, you wake up as someone else.

The morning came gray, silent, like an animal stalking. The fire had long since gone out, only smoke hung in the air, stale and tired like the men lying around it. They snored, panted, murmured in their sleep. I was already sitting awake, my hands over the last embers, my gaze blankly on the snow. I had thought

through the night, every breath, every look, every sound. The village wasn't bad. But it was too small. Too soft.

I saw them, the men who laughed yesterday and trembled today. Their faces looked old, like wood that had gotten wet too often. I thought: This is their life. Eating, drinking, sleeping, hoping, forgetting. A circle of breath that will never be repeated. I knew I couldn't do this. I didn't want to be part of their cycle. I wasn't a circle. I was a line, straight ahead, without end.

I stood up, grabbed the axe, the coat, the fur. I needed nothing more. Outside, the snow had fallen freshly, hard, clean. The wind was coming from the sea, salty, cold, honest. I crawled out, slowly but calmly. No hurry. I knew where I was going—not geographically, but deep within. Away from people who cover up fear with songs.

The old man saw me when I reached the edge of the village. He was standing by the well, leaning on his stick. "You go," he said. I nodded. "There's nothing here that makes me hungry." He looked at me for a long time and said, "You won't find a place that will satisfy you, boy." I grinned. "Then I'll stay hungry."

He laughed softly, that short, bitter laugh of men who know they've lost. "You're like fire," he said. "Beautiful from afar, deadly if you get too close." I nodded. "Then stay away."

I crawled further, down the slope, away from the smoke, the noise, the sleep of the others. Every breath burned, every grip on the snow hurt. But it was my pain, and that made it easier. I knew I was on the move again. No destination, no final destination. Just movement.

I thought of Mother. I thought of Rurik. I thought of the animal I had killed. All the same. All a part of me. I heard my thoughts, clear, quiet, honest: *I want more*. Not gold. Not fame. Just that feeling of becoming greater than what you think you are.

The sky cleared, gray over white, and I felt calm. I was empty, but that was good. Emptiness is space for what's to come. I looked around at the endless nothingness and said quietly, "Now it begins."

I crawled on, my gaze fixed on the distance that never came closer. Behind me, the village, which soon acted as if I had never been there. In front of me, snow, cold, wind. Above me, ravens. Beneath me, earth. Within me, hunger. And that was all I needed.

The Long Night of the Gods

The sky looked as if someone had forgotten the sun. Gray, heavy, without depth. I'd been traveling for days, maybe weeks. Time loses meaning when you're alone. The snow came thicker, the wind bit harder, but I liked that. Cold is honest. It doesn't ask if you're ready. It takes what's soft and leaves only what can hold.

I crawled on, my arms sore, my fingers slack, my breath sharp. Every move was a fight, but a fair one. I liked fights that didn't tell lies. Around me, nothing but white, and yet it had weight, almost like silence pressing on me. I thought of the village, of their faces, the laughter that was never mine. I laughed back, quietly, into the wind. "You're asleep now," I said. "I'm growing."

The storm came without warning. First a sound, like distant thunder, then a wind that cut like a knife. I pulled my coat tighter, bent low. The snow whipped, stung, and burned. I could see nothing, only movement, chaos, and infinity. I stopped, trying to breathe, but the air was too hard. I lay down, pressed my body against the ground, feeling the earth beneath me, cold, alive.

I thought of mother, of her words. "*If you die, die quietly.*" I didn't want to die silently. I wanted to live loudly. I screamed into the storm, not out of fear, but out of defiance. The wind took my voice, ripped it away, tore it to pieces. I laughed. "Take it," I screamed. "I have more!"

But the storm was greater than anger. It knocked the breath out of my chest, took away my sight, my direction, my feeling. I curled up, holding my arms above my head. I felt the snow settle over me, layer upon layer. I thought: So this is how it ends. Cold. Quiet. Without witnesses. I didn't like the thought, but I took it.

Then came the sound. Deep, far away, not wind, not thunder. Something else. I raised my head as best I could. A crack in the sky, perhaps my imagination, perhaps more. Light. Short, hard, blue. Not lightning, not fire. Something else. I blinked, saw it again. It was beautiful. Painfully beautiful. And something moved inside me that I hadn't felt since Mother.

I whispered, "If you're real, show yourself." No answer. Just the wind, the roar, the whistling. I laughed. "Coward." I don't know if I said it to a god or to myself. Maybe to both.

The storm raged on, for hours, maybe longer. I lost track of time. I heard only my heart, dull, steady, defiant. I thought: If this is the work of the gods, then I'm part of it. Not as a believer. As a mistake. I like mistakes. They change more than laws.

At some point the wind died down. I dug myself out, slowly, with numb hands. I breathed heavily, looked around. Everything was silent. White, empty, endless. I laughed again, hoarse but genuine. "Beautiful night," I said. "Beautiful gods."

I crawled further until I found the first tree. I lay down beneath it, breathed in the resinous scent, felt that I was back. Not saved. Just here. I looked up at the sky, now clear, vast, merciless. "If you exist," I said, "you've underestimated me."

Then I closed my eyes, and the world was quiet. I hadn't become a believer. Just more awake. And that was more dangerous.

I woke up with snow in my beard and ice in my hair. My body felt like a tool that had been used for too long—blunt, but indestructible. The storm was over. No sound, no movement. Just the snow, flat and still, like a freshly made grave. I lay there, breathing, and every breath was proof. I had done it again. I didn't know if it was luck or punishment. Maybe both.

The sun rose slowly, like one who is ashamed. Pale light, barely warm, but enough to show the shadows. I stood up, slowly, arms stiff, back heavy. My legs were numb, my fingers sore, but they obeyed. I laughed softly. "There you go." I looked around. The storm had changed everything. No more tracks, no path, no direction. Just this pure white. I liked it. A world without a past.

I pulled my coat tighter and crawled forward. The snow crunched, softly, rhythmically, like a breath. I smelled resin, earth, cold. I smelled life. I stopped and looked at my hands—pale, torn, bloody. I stretched them toward the sky, as if to show someone what they had forgotten. "Look," I said. "I'm still here." No answer. Of course not.

But there was something in the silence. No sound, no sign, just this feeling that someone was seeing me, even though no one was there. I grinned. "So, do you like how hard your work turned out?" I knew it was my imagination. But it felt better than saying nothing at all.

I thought of Mother. I thought of her hands, of the snow, of the blood that was always warm when she showed it. I said quietly, "You were right. Gods don't

help. But they watch." And that was enough for me. I didn't need help. Only eyes that saw how far I'd come.

I found water, frozen but clear. I broke the ice with the handle of the axe and drank. It tasted of metal, of life, of truth. I washed my face, my hands, and looked at my reflection in the ice. Pale, scarred, raw. I liked what I saw. Not pretty, but real.

I thought: This is my faith. Not in gods, not in fate. In myself. In the one who walks through storm and snow because he can do nothing else. I wasn't a supplicant. I was proof. I whispered: "I am my own God."

I crawled on, toward the sun. I didn't know where it led, but it was there, and that was enough. The wind blew gently, almost friendly. I felt my heart beating calmly. I thought: Maybe the storm wasn't a sign. Maybe it was just a test. And when gods test, I test in return.

I stopped, looked up at the sky, and raised the axe. "I'm coming," I said. "But in my own way." Then I continued walking, across the white, which slowly glittered, as if it wanted to show me that it understood me.

I found wood, dry enough to burn. I stacked it in a circle of stones, igniting it with sparks from a knife. It took a while, but eventually, flames appeared. Small, defiant, alive. I stared into it. Fire was always honest. It wants nothing, it doesn't lie. It eats what you give it and gives light until it's full. I liked that.

I sat there, the axe beside me, my coat tightly around my shoulders. The wind came in gusts, sometimes gentle, sometimes cutting. Above me was the sky, empty and vast, too vast to understand. I looked up and thought: If there's something up there, it's not nice. Nice doesn't create a world like this. Nice doesn't chill bones. Nice doesn't let children freeze to death.

I took a small branch and threw it into the fire. "So," I said quietly. "So this is it? The test? The plan?" The wind didn't answer. Of course not. I grinned. "You're all the same. Big words, no deeds. I, on the other hand... at least I bleed honestly."

I leaned back and watched the sparks rise into the sky. They looked like little lives, flaring briefly and then immediately extinguishing. I said, "If this is your work, then you're terrible craftsmen." I laughed, short, harsh. "But at least you were consistent."

I thought of all those I had lost. Mother. Rurik. The villagers whose names I had already forgotten. I wondered if they were now with those gods I spat upon. If so, they must be ashamed to see me. I imagined them whispering: *He won't make it.* I grinned. "I'm still here," I said into the wind.

The fire crackled. An ember leaped up, hit me on the arm, and burned a small hole in the fabric. I looked at it. Pain. A real sign. "See?" I said quietly. "That's honest. That's called an answer."

I threw another branch into the fire, then another. I felt the heat on my face, the throbbing in my hands. I felt alive, more than in any place with people. I understood that gods don't speak because they have nothing to say that you don't already know. I said, "You built me without asking me. Now look what's become of it."

The wind picked up. It sounded like he was laughing. I laughed along. "Yes," I said. "You're laughing. I am too. But mine's coming from below." I looked into the flames, saw faces in them, briefly, blurry, then gone. Mother, perhaps. Or just a memory. I said, "I don't believe in you. But I won't forget you either. You have to know who to disagree with."

The sky remained silent. Only stars. Innocent, cold dots in empty space. I grinned. "You are beautiful," I said. "But you are useless." I lay down, still looking up. "I don't believe in signs. I believe in hunger. And you will learn what that means."

I slept with my eyes open, the fire slowly dying out, the wind in my hair. And somewhere deep inside me, something laughed, quietly, contentedly. I had spoken. They had been silent. And I knew that was proof they had heard me.

I found the valley in the afternoon. The snow there was different—gray, almost black in places. It smelled of iron, old smoke, and something even the wind wouldn't carry. I crept in, slowly, carefully, and then I saw it. Bones everywhere. Shields, helmets, remnants of leather, half-rotted. Swords frozen in the ground, as if they never wanted to be drawn again.

I stopped and stared. No sound. Only the silence of things that have been dead for too long. I could almost feel it, that old rage that had burned here. People had screamed, bled, prayed. Now nothing remained. Only remnants, cold and honest.

I drew myself closer to an old helmet, half-dented and rusty. I touched it. The frost crackled, the metal felt alive. I wondered who had worn it. Did he believe the gods were helping him as he died? I laughed softly. "They didn't," I said.

I looked further. A broken shield, carved on it: *For honor and homeland*. I read the words aloud, tasting them in my mouth, like old lies. Honor. Homeland. Big words that sound beautiful before they kill. I whispered, "This is your work, not the gods'."

I crawled further and found a sword, half buried in the ice. I pulled on it; it came out heavily, crunching, but it came out. The blade was blunt, but it had stories. I saw my face in it, blurred, like a ghost. I said, "I'm like you. Only I'm still breathing." I held it for a while, then pushed it back into the ground. It fit better there.

Ravens circled above me. Black dots against the gray sky. They circled calmly, patiently. I nodded to them. "You got it," I said. "You wait until the rest fall." One croaked, deep, ancient, like a laugh. I grinned. "Yeah, yeah. I know."

I sat on an overturned wagon and looked out over the valley. It was large, wide, open. I imagined men standing here who believed they were immortal. And now everything was silent. No glory, no name, no song. Only bones. I thought: This is the work of the gods—not that they kill. That they make us believe we do it for them.

I took a handful of snow and let it melt in my hand. Drops, clear, cold, honest. I watched them fall, and in each one I saw a part of this world. A brief glow, then nothing. I said, "If greatness is what remains after you die, then you were all small."

I stayed there for a long time. Maybe hours. Maybe longer. I smelled the rust, the old blood, the wind. I thought: This is my temple. No prayers, no altars, only evidence. Here lay truth, cold and clean.

As it grew darker, I stood up. I picked up a bone, large, perhaps from a thigh, and placed it in the snow in front of me. I tapped it like an instrument. "That's you," I said. "And one day I will be, too. But first, I want to make more noise than all of you put together."

I continued walking, up the slope, until I saw the valley from above. White, gray, black, quiet. I said quietly, "I saw you. I know what you are. And I know

what I don't want to be." Then I turned away. I didn't look back. The silence followed me, like a shadow that shows respect.

I built a small fire among the stones, far enough from the valley so as not to end up like one of them. The wind blew softly, coldly, with the smell of old iron. I laid the axe beside me, looked into the flames, saw them dance, like ghosts with nothing left to lose. I knew I was in the land of the dead. Not because I believed it, but because I smelled it.

I lay down, pulled my coat over me, felt the cold through every seam. Sleep didn't come, only this twilight between waking and falling. I heard them, quietly at first. Breaths that weren't my own. Whispers, words, half in the wind, half in my head. *Stay awake... stay awake...*

I opened my eyes. Nothing. Just fire, snow, darkness. I laughed softly. "You're talking late, for the dead." The wind answered with a whisper that sounded like laughter. I turned onto my back and looked up at the sky. The stars shimmered as if they had a fever.

Then it came again. Voices. Many. Male, rough, broken. No singing, no pleading – memories. I didn't understand all the words. Only fragments. *Cut... stop... break... run...* I heard the clang of iron, the splintering of wood, the groans of men who knew they were going to fall. I didn't see them. But I knew they saw me.

I whispered, "You're late." A voice, deep, almost like Rurik's, said: *You are early.* I laughed. "Then I'm ahead."

The fire crackled, sparks rose like small embers. I saw them, thought: These are their souls, if such a thing exists. A brief flash of light, then over. I said: "I won't follow you. I'll overtake you."

The wind died down. Silence. Only my breathing, steady, calm. I suddenly felt warmth at my back, even though the fire was in front of me. I didn't turn around. I knew there was nothing there I wanted to see. I just said, "I know why you're talking. You want someone to listen. So listen to me."

I raised the axe, pointing it into the darkness. "I've seen you, your bones, your pride, your end. I'll do it differently. I won't die for gods, not for honor. I'll die when I want to, and when I fall, I'll die loud enough for you to hear."

Then there was silence again. No voices. No wind. Just my heart, dull, reliable. I grinned. "Fine. Then we're agreed." I put the axe down again, pulled my coat tighter, and watched the embers grow fainter.

Before I fell asleep, I said quietly into the darkness: "I won't forget you. But I'll die better than you." And somewhere far away, in the wind, I heard it. A quiet, throaty laugh. Not mockery. Approval.

I fell asleep with the taste of iron in my mouth and the feeling that I had just agreed to an oath that no one had spoken.

The morning smelled of rust. No more smoke, no more fire, only that metallic smell that remains when all life has gone. I woke up, my eyes glued shut by the sleep that wasn't sleep. I sat up, looked at the valley below me, as silent as a grave that no longer knows who lies within.

I felt heavy, but not weak. Heavy, like something carrying more than its body. My hands were cold, stiff, but I felt a trembling in them that wasn't from the cold. I stood up, pulled my coat tighter, and reached for the axe. It felt different. Not like a tool, more like a key.

I crawled to the edge of the valley and looked down once more. Bones, shields, iron. The old song of glory. I thought: Yesterday they were voices. Today they are silent. Tomorrow I will be one of them. I didn't like the thought, but I accepted it.

I said quietly, "I heard you." My voice sounded raspy, deeper than usual. "And I won't forget you. But I'll die differently. You were the masses. I'll become the edge." No answer. Only the wind, coming and going, like someone who listens and then disappears.

I crawled further, out of the valley, toward the slope. Every grip I made in the snow was a step away from the dead and closer to what I would become. I felt them following me—not as ghosts, but as a weight. As something pushing me forward.

Once at the top, I didn't turn back. I looked into the distance, white and empty. No trace, no path. Only hunger. I smiled. "This is my road," I said. "No God, no song, just me."

The wind blew through my hair, sharp, cold, but clean. I took a deep breath, and it tasted of iron. I liked that. Iron was honest. Iron was a promise. I said quietly, "I'm part of this." Then I gripped the axe tighter, fixed my gaze on the

horizon, and crawled on until the valley disappeared behind me like a dream that no longer hurt.

And as I pushed forward, I knew: I was carrying them all with me—Mother, Rurik, the deer, the villagers, the dead down here. I was no different than them. But I would make more noise before I fell.

The night was clear and black, like freshly broken ink. No clouds, no storms, just the sky, full of dots so sharp they burned my eyes. I sat on a rock, my cloak wrapped around me, my axe beside me. No fire this time. I wanted cold. I wanted to see how far I could get without warmth.

The ground was hard, the wind soft, almost gentle. I heard only my breathing, heavy, slow. I had left the battlefield behind me, but not within me. Inside me, it was louder than ever. The voices were gone, but their echo remained. It didn't sound like words. More like a beat. Like a heart bigger than mine.

I looked up at the sky. The stars were still, but they looked like eyes. I said quietly, "You look at me. I look back." No response. I grinned. "Fine. Then let's play it like that."

I took the axe and placed it across my knees. The blade was cold, blunt, but it felt alive. I ran my finger over the iron until it cut. A small cut, a red dot. I looked at him and smiled. "This is my sacrifice," I said. "You'll get nothing more."

The wind picked up, barely noticeable. I closed my eyes, letting it rustle through my hair. I thought of Mother, of the deer, of the men in the village, of the bones in the valley. All the same material. All the same price. I breathed deeply, and it tasted of blood and frost. I liked it. It was real.

I said, "Your long night isn't over. It's within me." I placed my hand on my chest, feeling the blow beneath it. Calm, strong, not pretty. "I am your shadow, and I will walk until you know me."

The stars shimmered as if they had twitched. Maybe it was just the wind. Maybe not. I laughed, quietly, hoarsely. "I don't need you," I said. "But you will need me."

I laid the axe beside me, leaned my head back, and continued to look up. The night was cold, but I was awake. There was fire inside me, not warm, not kind. Cold. Clear. A fire that doesn't burn, but builds. I knew that was my faith. No God, no fate. Only this hunger, which lay beneath mine like a second skin.

I closed my eyes, and the darkness wasn't empty. It was full. Full of everything I had been and everything I still had to be. I smiled. Not a pretty smile. A real one. Then I sank down onto the stone, breathed, and said quietly, "Now I begin."

Above me, the stars slowly moved on. Beneath me, my heart beat. Around me, the long night of the gods. Within me, the cold fire. And I knew: It would not go out.

Laughing Fire

I arrived in the village at dusk. The sky burned red, as if it had swallowed its own sun. The air smelled of peat, smoke, and fish—that old, honest mixture of life and decay. I crept slowly across the frozen ground, and every time my cloak stirred in the wind, I saw the stares. Not the stares of those who are curious. The stares of those who know.

Two men stood at the gate, spears in hand, but the points weren't pointing at me. They just stood there, silent, their eyes on my legs, then on my face. One said, "You're him." I grinned. "Which one?" He answered, "The Boneless One." I laughed, quietly. "So that's what they call me." The man nodded. "They say you spoke to the dead in a storm." "I didn't speak to anyone," I said. "I just listened."

They let me through. No questions, no "where from," no "where to." I liked that. Suspicion is more honest than pity. The village smelled of burnt wood. People saw me and kept their distance. Children were dragged inside, doors were slammed. I thought: This must be what it's like when you're no longer human, but history.

An old woman, with eyes like cold water, stepped out of a hut. "Stop," she said. I stayed. She came closer, studied me, slowly, carefully. "You bring fire," she said. I grinned. "I'll bring myself." She nodded. "That's worse."

She led me to a house that was larger than the others. Inside, it was warm and smelled of animal fat and beer. Men were sitting at the table, talking quietly. When I came in, they fell silent. I liked that. I said nothing, sat down on the ground. One, tall, with a beard down to his chest, asked, "How far did you go?" I replied, "Until there was nothing left." He nodded slowly. "And what did you find?" "Me," I said.

He laughed briefly, but not mockingly. "Then drink with us." I shook my head. "I don't drink with men who want to forget. I drink with those who remember." Silence. Then he said, "Then tell me."

I looked into the flame flickering in the hearth and spoke. Not loudly, not beautifully, but clearly. I told of the storm, of the valley, of the bones. I didn't tell of fear, because there wasn't any. Only cold and hunger. I spoke, and they listened. Not a word interrupted. Only the crackling of the fire.

When I finished, no one said anything. The tall man stood up, filled a cup, and placed it in front of me. "You're not like others," he said. I grinned. "I've noticed." He looked into the flame. "Sometimes you need a fire that laughs." I looked at him. "I'm not burning for you. I'm burning because I have to." He nodded. "Then burn here. We can use it."

I stayed seated, watched the light dance across their faces. Men who had already lost everything, but kept drinking, kept talking, kept breathing. I understood them, but I wasn't one of them. I was the one who laughed when things burned.

Outside, it was snowing again. Quietly. I took the cup and took a sip. It tasted bitter, strong, real. I said quietly, "Fire only laughs when it has something to eat." Then I put the cup down. I was hungry. But not for bread.

I stayed longer than I wanted. Maybe days, maybe weeks. Time flowed here like cold tar—slow, tenuous, but steady. The village was small, barely twenty men, twice as many women, children, and the elderly. They lived off fish, wood, and silence. I liked the silence. It was the most honest form of community I knew.

At first, they kept their distance. I ate alone, slept alone, and rarely spoke. But they watched me. Always. When I fetched water. When I carried wood. When I crouched in the snow and watched the fire. They saw that I was different, and they didn't know whether to admire it or fear it. In the end, they did both.

The tall man—they called him Bjorn—talked to me the most. No fool, but one who had believed for too long in rules that no longer applied. One evening we sat by the fire, and he said, "The men are losing heart. They think winter will break them." I looked into the flame. "Then break them first. That way they'll learn what it feels like." He grinned uncertainly. "That's not leadership." "Yes, it is," I said. "Those who fall make way for those who remain."

He was silent for a while, then nodded slowly. "And those who stay?" "They're getting tougher."

The next day, he had the men line up. I stood by and said nothing. He talked, saying things about courage, solidarity, hope. They listened, but without faith. I saw it in their eyes. Words bounce off if they don't burn. So I stepped forward. I said: "You want to live? Then forget the word hope. Hope freezes faster than blood. You want gods? Then look in the mirror. You want peace? Then die."

They looked at me like animals deciding whether to flee or follow. I waited. Then one said, "What do you want from us?" I grinned. "Nothing. I just want to see who stays when it hurts."

It was quiet. Then someone stepped forward—young, thin, with eyes like an animal that's been hungry for too long. "I'll stay," he said. I nodded. "Then stay real."

That evening, Bjorn came to me. "You moved her," he said. I shook my head. "I reminded her." "Of what?" "That pain is not an enemy."

From then on, they saw me differently. No longer as a cripple, no longer as a stranger. As something they didn't understand, but needed. They came with questions, with requests, with fear. I offered no answers, only sentences that burned. "If you must fall, fall forward." - "A man without fear is dead, he just doesn't realize it." - "The world wants to break you. Let it."

I saw them changing. Slowly, imperceptibly. Less laughing, more alertness. Less pleading, more doing. I knew they didn't fully believe me, but they felt something was right. And that was enough.

That night, I sat outside, watching the fire flicker in the snow. Bjorn came out and sat down next to me. "You bring darkness," he said. I grinned. "Just enough for you to finally see light."

We sat quietly, the wind blew over us, and somewhere in the distance a wolf howled. I looked into the embers and thought: This is my language—fear, hunger, fire. They understand me now. And that's enough.

The days grew colder. The wind brought snow, and the snow brought hunger. Fish were scarce, wood was scarce, the children coughed at night until they turned blue. The men talked less, drank more. I saw it, heard it, smelled it. The smell of decay is like wet leather—you don't notice it until it's too late.

One evening we were sitting by the fire, and Bjorn said, "We have two barrels of dried fish left. After that, nothing more." The men stared into the flames, no one said anything. I looked at him. "And the neighboring village?" He shook his head. "Too far. And they're stronger." I grinned. "Stronger just means they have more to lose."

He looked at me as if he knew he'd regret listening to me. "What do you suggest?" "We take what we need. And if they scream, we don't listen." "This isn't a deal," he said. "No," I said. "This is life."

The next morning, six of us stood ready. No big speeches. Just weapons, cold breath, empty stomachs. I led them, even though no one said it out loud. We walked through the snow for hours until the wind blinded us and the village appeared—a few huts, smoke, movement.

Bjorn looked at me. "If we do it, there's no turning back." I nodded. "There's never a turning back."

We waited until darkness fell. Then we set off. No battle plan, no prayers to the gods. Just footsteps, snow, breath. I was in front. I felt every beat of my heart, calm, steady, ready. I thought: Now we'll show what hunger can do.

The first man I saw was carrying wood. I jumped on him before he knew it. No scream, just the dull thud of something falling. The others followed. Chaos. Doors opening, fire, screams. Men running, women dragging children away. I saw everything, but I felt nothing. Only the pounding in my head that said: Keep going.

We took what we found—fish, meat, blankets. One of the men hesitated. "They have children," he said. I looked at him. "Then they should learn what fathers never learned: to lose." He swallowed, nodded. I knew he understood, even though he hated it.

It didn't take long. We were fast, precise, cold. No bloodlust, no pride. Just purpose. I liked that. Real violence is quiet. Loud violence is theater.

As we walked back, the sky was black, the wind still. The men carried what they could. I looked into their faces. No joy. Just that dusty something that remains when you realize you've done what you had to do.

Bjorn came beside me. "You changed her," he said. "No," I said. "I reminded her." "Of what?" "That gods don't feed."

He nodded slowly. "And what if they want revenge?" I grinned. "Then they know where to find it."

We returned and laid down the loot. The women looked at us, silent. No questions. They knew. They knew they were full now, but it would cost something. I liked that look. Gratitude without belief.

That night I sat alone, the axe in my lap, staring into the embers. I said quietly, "Fire laughs when it burns. And so do I." Then I smiled. Not pretty. But honestly.

The fire had almost burned down. Only red embers remained, flickering when the wind blew through the open roof. Outside, everything was quiet. No child cried, no dog barked. Satiety has a way of making even breathing quieter. I sat there, the axe beside me, and watched the fat in the kettle sizzle at the edge of the fire. It smelled of salt, smoke, and what one has survived.

Bjorn came quietly and sat down opposite me. He said nothing. I liked that about him—he didn't talk unless he had something to say. After a while, he said, "They're all asleep." I nodded. "They should be. Tomorrow they'll start being human again." He stared into the embers. "I saw the women's eyes. The fear. That wasn't right."

I grinned. "Right is what lasts. Wrong is what freezes." He shook his head. "You don't believe in guilt?" I pulled the axe closer to me, turning it in the light. "Guilt is for men who act too late. We were on time."

He laughed briefly, bitterly. "You talk as if this were all a game." "It is. Only the rules of engagement are ugly." He looked at me for a long time. I didn't like that look. Too human. Too much hope. I said, "You want the blood to make sense. It doesn't. It warms you, that's all."

He rubbed his face. "I saw you kill the man at the gate. You didn't hesitate." I nodded. "Because he did. That's the difference." "You don't feel anything about it?" I thought for a moment. "Yes, I do. Calm down."

He was silent. I looked into the flame, which was almost extinguished. "You know, Bjorn," I said calmly, "guilt is like snow. First it covers everything, and then it crushes you if you don't move." He nodded slowly. "And what remains when everything goes under?" "Me," I said.

He looked at me, and I saw something in his eyes that was more dangerous than fear—understanding. He understood that I believed what I said. And he

knew that someone like that would never find peace. "You will die alone, Ivar," he said. I grinned. "All dying is alone. I'm just doing it willingly."

We fell silent again. The wind blew through the roof, making sparks dance. I heard someone talking in their sleep outside. A child, perhaps. I thought of Mother. Of the storm. Of the voices of the dead. Everything the same. Everything old.

Bjorn finally stood up. "I don't know if you're saving us or cursing us." I looked at him. "I don't know either. But at least I'm doing something."

He nodded, left, and left me alone. I stayed until the embers turned black and the smoke smelled only of cold fat. I didn't lie down. I sat there, all night, and looked into the ashes. No guilt. No remorse. Only the knowledge that I lived because someone else didn't.

I whispered softly, "It's that simple." And the wind answered with nothing. As always.

I woke up early. The sky was pale, the light cutting like a knife through cold milk. The fire in the village had long since gone out, only smoke hung over the rooftops like a memory that wouldn't go away. I stood up, grabbed the axe, and went outside. The air was heavy, too still. Silence has a tone, if you know it. And that tone said: *Something is coming*.

Bjorn was already awake. He stood on the wall, his hand over his eyes, looking north. "They're coming," he said. I nodded. No shock, no amazement. Just the logical end of an honest day. "How many?" I asked. "Twenty, maybe more." I grinned. "Then we'll have enough room to study."

He turned to me. "We can hide. Bring women, children, supplies into the forest—" I cut him off. "And then? Wait until they're finished? We've taken, so we give back. That's how it works."

He looked at me as if he wanted to object, but the thought stuck in his throat. I walked past him, down the slope. The men were down there, gathering weapons, talking too loudly. I looked at them, one by one. No one was ready, but they all pretended. I said, "Stop pretending you have courage. You're hungry, and that's enough. Hunger kills more than pride."

One asked, "And if we lose?" I grinned. "Then at least we'll know what we bled for. Not for gods, not for songs—for flesh."

I walked through the rows, touched shoulders, looked into faces. Trembling, sweat, breathing, all real. I said: "You want to live? Then stop believing in salvation. There is none. Only time. And that goes to the one who produces more blood."

Bjorn came to me, his hand shaking slightly. "If they kill us, they'll whisper your name." "Then at least they'll whisper properly," I said.

Then I saw them. On the other side of the hill, shadows against the snow. Men with shields, torches, anger. I smelled it, that anger. It smells like fear in disguise. I raised the axe, looked at the men. "See?" I said. "That's us—only later. So show them how it's done."

The first arrow hit the ground, quietly, unspectacularly. Then the second. Then the shouts. I felt something stirring inside me—no adrenaline, no rush. Just this cold, clear feeling that says: *Now you are awake.*

I ran as best I could, half crawling, half dragging. Snow splashed, my breath steamed. I saw the faces of the men around me—panic, rage, all real. I yelled, "No turning back! Turning back is death!"

Then the impact crashed. Wood against wood, metal against flesh. I heard screams, the shattering of shields. I fell, got up again, slashed, felt the blow in my arms, the echo in my bones. Blood spurted, warm, living. I grinned.

I didn't know how long it lasted. Minutes, hours—time dissolves when you fight. I saw Bjorn fall, get up, fall again. I pulled him away, kept hitting. No thinking. Just doing. Just surviving.

When it was over, the snow was red, and the wind smelled of iron. We stood there, panting, covered in blood, fewer than before, but enough. I saw the faces of the dead, strange and familiar at the same time. I said quietly, "You were no different. Just slower."

Bjorn came to me, bleeding, his face half in shadow. "We're alive," he said. I nodded. "Still."

He looked at me, tired, empty. "How could you stay calm?" I grinned. "Because I never believed I was supposed to."

Then I looked up at the sky. Gray, cold, without any sign. And I knew: This was what the gods meant when they spoke of fire. Not flame. Not brilliance. Just that which laughs when everything else burns.

The wind had died down, but the smoke remained. It hung over the village like a blanket of guilt, only here there was no one left to bear it. I stood in the middle of it, bareheaded, axe in hand, my fingers numb from blood that had long since turned cold. The snow beneath me was black. I smelled iron, sweat, death. And I laughed.

Not loud, not like a madman. Just that quiet, honest laughter that comes from your gut when you finally know who you are. I wasn't a hero. Not a victor. Not a savior. I was the fire that laughed while everything else burned. And that felt right.

Bjorn came toward me, bloodied and limping. He was holding onto a lance that no longer belonged to anyone. "We did it," he said. His voice sounded brittle, almost like an apology. I nodded. "Yes. And we didn't lose anything that belonged to us." He looked at me, tired, empty. "I lost men." I grinned. "Then now you know what it costs to live."

He wanted to say something, but he couldn't. Instead, he just sat down in the snow and put his head in his hands. I let him. I liked him, but I didn't feel sorry for him. Pity is like lukewarm water—it puts out a fire, but it makes you sick.

I walked through the village. Rubble, blood, broken weapons. Children who didn't scream. Women who stared. The sky above: colorless, dead. I stopped in front of a man I had killed myself. I didn't know his face, but I liked how peaceful he looked. I said quietly, "You be quiet now. I won't."

I picked up a piece of wood from the ground and threw it into the fire. It hissed, sparks rose. I thought: This is what truth looks like—bright for a moment, then black. I stopped and watched the flames grow, higher, hotter. It wasn't a victory. It was purification.

Bjorn returned, his gaze hard and determined. "They will come," he said. "Brothers, sons, friends of those we killed. They will hunt us." I grinned. "Then they'll learn what hunting means." He shook his head. "You want war." "I want clarity," I said. "And war is more honest than peace."

He wanted to say something, but he didn't. He knew I was right. I looked into the embers, and for a moment I thought she was laughing. Just like me. I saw my reflection in them—distorted, bloody, but real. I said quietly, "I am what remains when the fire is out."

Children were crying behind me. I didn't turn around. Crying was the sound of life remembering. I had nothing left to remember. Only the now, the burning, the laughter inside me.

I sat down on a fallen beam, the axe between my knees. I watched the sun rise, dull, powerless, like an old man trying again. I grinned at it. "Come on," I said. "Show me you're still alive."

She didn't. And that was okay.

The night smelled of ash and blood, of what was once life. I sat alone before the fire, which slowly diminished but refused to die. It was tired, like me, but stubborn. Every flame seemed to know it would soon go out—and that was precisely why it laughed. I liked that. I liked everything that knew it was going to end and yet burned on.

The village was silent. Bjorn was asleep somewhere, or pretending to be. The others were too. Only the crackling remained, the breathing of the embers, the quiet, steady cracking of the wood. I laid the axe beside me, stretched my hands over the heat. They were sore, cracked, bruised—but they didn't tremble. I looked at them and thought: This is what remains when you stop asking yourself if you're right.

I picked up a piece of glowing coal with a stick, held it up, and watched it glow. Red, vibrant, clear. A heart without a body. I said quietly, "This is what truth looks like." Then I dropped it into the snow, watched it hiss, smoke, and disappear. I whispered, "This is what everything looks like when it's over."

I thought of everything I had left behind—Mother, Rurik, the village, the gods, the dead in the snow. And I realized I hadn't lost them. They were within me, every blow, every sound, every night. I was their proof that nothing truly passes away. Only the form changes. Blood becomes smoke, pain becomes embers, life becomes laughter.

I grinned. "Maybe I'm not even human anymore." I looked into the flames. "Maybe I'm the fire that laughs when you sleep." I said it not as a curse, but as a fact. The fire responded with a crackle, as if in agreement.

I lay back, gazing up at the sky. No stars today, only darkness. But it didn't feel empty. Rather, it felt calm. I thought: Maybe I haven't been abandoned by the gods at all. Maybe I am what they could never be—what remains when you no longer believe.

I felt the warmth on my face, the ache in my arms, the tiredness in my bones. But there was also something new. No peace, no comfort—only this quiet, cold fire within me, burning without destroying. I knew it would remain. Even if I froze to death, it would continue to glow.

I whispered into the night: "I have been found. Not by humans. By fire." I laughed softly. No madness, no pride—just the clear, sober laugh of a man who knows there is no turning back.

Then I lowered my head, my eyes half-open, the sky above me, the embers before me. And as the flames diminished, I felt them grow within me. I needed no gods, no prayers. I had myself. And that was enough.

On the edge of sleep, I heard the fire laugh once more. Deep, warm, ancient. I smiled. "I hear you," I said. "And I burn with you."

Brotherly hands

I saw Kattegat before they saw me. The hills, the water, the ships—everything as I remembered, but smaller. Memories shrink as you grow. I crawled slowly down the slope, the axe at my belt, my cloak heavy with the dirt of the months. Every step was a conversation with the earth, and it responded with cold.

Below, men stood at the harbor. I recognized them, the faces, the voices, the bearing. Brothers, sons, warriors, farmers—all the same flesh, of the same blood. One saw me first. "By Odin," he said. "The Boneless One." I grinned. "Still."

They approached cautiously, as one approaches an animal that smiles but bites. Hvitserk was the first to have the courage to stop. He looked older, broader, but there was the same restlessness in his eyes. He said, "Brother." I nodded. "Yet."

He looked at my legs, at my hands, at the axe. "They say you burned down a village." "I've done many things," I said. "And some of them are still alive."

He wanted to say something, but his voice broke somewhere between fear and pride. "Father would be proud of you." I laughed softly. "Father was proud of anyone who bled." "And Mother?" I looked at him. "Mother is in everything I kill."

The men behind him murmured. Names were mentioned, words I didn't hear because they were unimportant. One asked, "Why did you come back?" I replied, "Because I can."

They looked at each other as if they'd expected more. Grand declarations, remorse, perhaps tears. I had none of that. I had fire, hunger, silence. I looked beyond them, to the water where the ships lay, dark and patient. I said, "You're still sailing? Looting, killing, celebrating?" Hvitserk nodded. "Some things don't change." I grinned. "Yes, I do."

He took a step closer. "You've gotten colder." "No," I said. "I just stopped pretending to be warm."

He placed a hand on my shoulder. Brotherly hands, heavy, familiar, honest. I felt them tremble. "I missed you," he said. I nodded. "Me too."

Behind us, someone called for a campfire, for meat, for mead. Life went on, as always. I stood there, among them, and knew I was back, but nowhere near home. I saw their faces, their laughter, their drinking—and felt that wall between us. One that no word, no blood, no battle would ever tear down.

I looked at Hvitserk, direct, calm. "I'm not here to remember." "Then why?" "Because everything I learned outside has to start here."

He frowned. "What have you learned?" I grinned. "That I'm not a brother. I'm fire. And you've forgotten how to burn."

Then I walked past him, into the crowd, right into the old heart of Kattegat. The voices fell silent as I passed. I liked that. I preferred fear to applause.

And as the laughter started up again behind me, I thought: I'm back. But not to stay. Just to remind them who I was—and what they could never become.

The night smelled of salt, smoke, and old beer. We sat in the longhouse, my brothers, a few old warriors, women, children, dogs—everything that defined Kattegat. The hall was warm, loud, lively. I didn't like the noise anymore, but I let it roll over me like the wind. It used to make me nervous. Now it was like a song I knew but didn't want to sing along to anymore.

Hvitserk sat across from me, mug in hand, smile on his face. Next to him was Ubbe, calm, taller, perhaps wiser. His eyes watched me the way one watches a wolf standing at the door. I grinned. "Well, brother, still a philosopher?" He raised his mug. "And you still fire?" I laughed. "I'm what's left."

Bjorn wasn't there. Somewhere out there, they said. War, women, another life. I thought about him briefly, then let it go. Men like Bjorn needed witnesses to be real. I didn't.

The men told stories. Old battles, storms, women, gods. Always the same words, the same gestures. They laughed, clinked glasses, shouted names. I watched as their mouths spoke, but their eyes were empty. I thought: They're still alive, but they've already fallen silent.

Ubbe leaned forward. "You hardly talk." "I talked enough when no one was listening." He nodded, drank, and looked at me again. "What did you find outside?" I grinned. "Me." He laughed. "You were always convinced." "No," I said. "Now I'm sure."

Hvitserk banged on the table, laughing loudly, too loudly. "He's back! The Boneless One! The terror of the gods!" The men shouted, toasted, and knocked on wood. I smiled, but inside it was silent. I thought: They're calling your name because they need it. Not because they know who you are.

A woman came and poured more mead. She didn't look at me. I liked that. Those who look want something. Those who don't look know. I took the cup, smelled it, and drank. It tasted sweet, heavy, and old. Like everything here.

Ubbe looked at me for a long moment. "You've changed." I nodded. "You haven't." "What do you mean?" "You still think you're alive because you're fighting. I know I'm alive because I can't die."

He was silent. The sentence hung between us, like smoke that doesn't disappear. I looked into the fire burning in the middle. The flames danced, casting light on their faces, making them soft, human. I liked the fire more than the men. It didn't lie. It ate what was given to it and laughed when it was full.

I took a log and threw it in. Sparks rose, burned briefly, and then faded away. I said quietly, "You call me brother. But we don't speak the same language anymore."

Ubbe answered calmly, "Then teach us yours." I grinned. "It's made of pain. And you've been sitting in the warmth for too long."

The hall fell silent. A few men stopped talking. I felt their gazes. Some filled with anger, others with fear. Hvitserk looked at me, half sad, half proud. "You have darkness in your blood," he said. I nodded. "I've earned it."

Then I stood up, axe in hand, not as a threat, just as a reminder. I said, "I'm back, but not to celebrate. I'm back because the fire isn't finished yet."

I went out into the cold, and her laughter remained behind me, muffled, drunken, dead. Outside, the sky was black, the sea loud, the wind honest. I breathed deeply. This was my home. Not the hall, not the brothers, not the blood. Only the cold, which didn't lie to me.

The morning came quietly, gray and cold. No wind, no snow. Just this heavy, motionless sky over Kattegat. I stood outside, at the edge of the hill, looking out at the sea. It lay there, smooth as metal, motionless, dead. I liked that. Things that are silent have more honesty than those that resonate.

Hvitserk came first. Always him. He had the heart that always beat too early. He stepped beside me, folded his arms, and said nothing. I nodded. That was enough. Then Ubbe came, quietly, like someone who thinks he's not going to be noticed. I smelled him before I saw him—salt, sweat, old leather. Family has lingering smells.

"You disturbed her," said Ubbe. I grinned. "I woke her up." He looked at the water. "You talk as if the world were an enemy." "It is," I said. "Only fools pretend it's a friend."

Hvitserk laughed softly, but there was nothing joyful about it. "You came back, and everything feels different." I turned to him. "I haven't changed. I've just become honest." "Honest?" "Yes. Honest enough to say that we're no longer brothers, but men with the same parents."

Ubbe shook his head, smiling sadly. "You speak as if blood were nothing." I looked at him, calm, clear. "Blood is everything. But it's not a reason."

He remained silent because he knew I was right. Blood binds, but it also binds. I had long since lost my shackles. I looked up at the sky, cloudy and heavy. "I learned outside," I said. "Whoever offers you a hand also takes your direction. I don't want any more hands."

Hvitserk stepped closer and placed his hand on my shoulder. Brotherly hands. Warm, real, heavy. I left it there. For a moment, it was almost as if everything were as it used to be. Then I said quietly, "Take it away." He did it. Slowly.

"What do you want, Ivar?" Ubbe finally asked. I grinned. "I want you to stop calling me brother and call me what I am." "And what is that?" "The one who comes when you're asleep."

Silence. Only the sea, quiet, cold. I saw their faces—pain, fear, memories. All useless. I said, "You live in the shadows of men who are dead. I live in the fire that remains."

Ubbe took a step back. "Then you're no longer one of us." I nodded. "Finally, someone says it."

I turned away, looked back at the sea. It glittered briefly as the sun broke through. Cold, white light. I smiled. "Do you see that?" I said. "Even the light here is cold. It suits me."

I heard them breathing behind me, but no one spoke. I knew they saw what I had become. Not a brother. Not a son. Not a man who returns home. Only one who stays, because he knows that even cold can be home, if you freeze long enough.

I turned around briefly, saw them one last time. "You are my blood," I said. "But the fire has given me new brothers." Then I walked down the slope, away from them, away from the house, away from everything that was still human.

Hvitserk called my name, softly, almost pleadingly. I didn't stop. Names don't stop anyone.

I walked alone through Kattegat. No destination, no plan. Just steps over frozen earth, through dirt and snow, past houses that smelled of fish, sweat, and oblivion. People saw me, but they pretended not to. That kind of silence can be louder than a scream. I liked it. I knew what they were thinking. They knew my name, but not my skin.

Children whispered, women pulled them away. Men nodded at me without looking. One said quietly, "The Boneless One." I stopped and looked at him. He lowered his gaze. I grinned. "Still," I said. Then I moved on.

The market was full. Fish, furs, knives, voices. Life. Everything that never truly wanted me. I stopped, watched the trade, the haggling, the laughter. It was honest and empty at the same time. People who survive by pretending they have a future. I didn't. I was the reminder of what you lose when you believe in hope for too long.

A woman called something to me. I didn't understand the word, but the tone was clear—fear, seasoned with curiosity. I approached. She stepped back. I saw her face. Young, but with those old eyes you get when you've learned too early

what the world costs. I said quietly, "Don't be afraid. I only bite when necessary." She nodded, maybe understanding, maybe not. I moved on.

I stopped in front of the smithy. The blacksmith, tall, strong, his arms covered in soot, struck iron, rhythmically, calmly. I watched him. Each blow sounded like a heartbeat that keeps beating because it can't help it. I said, "Iron never forgets." He looked up, saw me, and nodded. Not a word. Not a command. Just that quiet understanding between two who know that pain is honest.

I went to the harbor. The boats rocked, the water was black, almost beautiful. Men were loading barrels, cursing, laughing. I looked at them and thought: This is the world. It's going on, no matter who dies. And that's precisely why it needs people like me—to remind us that everything that's going on will eventually fall.

An old man walked by, limping, with a sack on his shoulder. He stopped and looked at me. "You are Ragnarsson's son," he said. I nodded. "One of them." He grinned crookedly. "Your father thought he could tame the world." I laughed softly. "And I know that's all they do to set it on fire." The old man nodded, as if he'd expected just that. "Then don't burn too quickly," he said. I grinned. "Too late."

I moved on, through the sound of voices, hammering, life. Everything passed me by, like water over a stone. I wasn't a part of it, but I held it together. I was what no one talked about, but everyone knew was there.

I stopped at the edge of the settlement, where the land sloped into the sea. The wind was strong here, more honest than the people. I breathed deeply, the taste of salt biting my tongue. I said quietly, "I am what remains when you all stop believing."

And I knew it wasn't a threat. Just a fact. I wasn't the king. I wasn't the son. I was the man no one wanted—and that's exactly why the world needed me.

I sat at the edge of the harbor, the axe beside me, my legs under an old blanket. The wind was coming from the sea, cold and salty, just the way I liked it. I stared at the water lapping against the pilings, rhythmic and indifferent. I thought of Mother, of the fire, of everything that moves just to keep from standing still.

I heard footsteps behind me. Two. Slow, heavy. I didn't turn around. I knew who it was. You can tell brothers by their sound, even after years. "You could

have said something," said Ubbe. "I'm always saying something," I said. "You just don't listen."

He came closer, Hvitserk behind him. They looked tired, but clean. I grinned. "You look like you've been sleeping." Hvitserk sat down next to me. "You look like you haven't stopped being awake." "Sleep is for those who want to forget."

For a while we said nothing. Only the sea spoke, quietly, forever. Then Ubbe said, "We wanted to see you." I nodded. "Now you've done it." "It's not that simple," he said. "Yes, it is," I said. "Everything is simple when you stop looking for excuses."

Hvitserk sighed, pushing a stone with his foot. "You don't hate us, do you?" I laughed. "No. I don't hate anything. I just stopped believing that love is worth anything if it doesn't have teeth." "Teeth?" he asked. "Yes," I said. "Love that doesn't bite is just pity. And pity is poison."

Ubbe looked at me. "You talk like someone who's already dead." I grinned. "I'm just being honest. This is worse."

He knelt beside me, looking me straight in the eyes. "You don't have to be like this." "Have to?" I laughed, quietly, harshly. "I'm what's left after the must is gone."

He was silent, but his hands trembled slightly. I liked that. Trembling means there's still life. I said, "You still have hope. That's nice. Keep it. I don't need it."

Hvitserk placed his hand on my shoulder, the same movement as before. A brotherly hand. Heavy, warm, honest. I left it there, briefly, then I said, "If you want to hold me, hold on. But don't be surprised if you get burned." He pulled it back. Slowly. "You're sick, Ivar," he said quietly. I grinned. "No. I'm healed. Just different."

Ubbe stood up and shook his head. "You talk like you're alone in the world." "I am," I said. "Everyone is. Some just don't realize it."

They looked at me, helpless, angry, sad—all at once. I stood up, leaned on the axe handle, and looked at them. "I love you," I said. "But I don't need you. That's the difference between us."

Then I walked past them without turning around. I knew they would watch me go, with those eyes that still believe blood is more important than truth. I smiled. "Love without fear," I murmured, "is just warm water in a cold world."

No one behind me said anything. Only the wind spoke again. And it was honest.

The night was silent, only the wind blew through the cracks of the longhouse. A weak fire burned, just enough to smell the smoke, but not enough to provide light. Ubbe sat at the table, cup in hand, shoulders heavy. Hvitserk lay on a bench, half awake, half drunk. The smell of mead and tiredness hung in the air.

"He'll burn us all," Ubbe said quietly. Hvitserk opened one eye. "Maybe he has to." "Don't say that." "Yes," said Hvitserk. "Because it's true."

Ubbe shook his head. "You don't understand him. He thinks he's fire itself." "Maybe he is." "Or he's just sick." Hvitserk sat up slowly, picked up the cup, and drank. "Maybe. But at least he's genuinely sick. We're just politely crazy."

Silence. Only the crackling of the fire. Ubbe looked at the ground. "He was always different. Even as a child. I thought it would go away." Hvitserk laughed softly. "Things like that don't go away. They grow. Like rust."

Ubbe looked at him. "You're afraid of him." "Of course," said Hvitserk. "But that's nothing new. I've always been afraid of him. And at the same time—" He paused. "What?" "I admire him."

Ubbe frowned. "Admire him? For what?" Hvitserk leaned back, looking into the flickering light. "For what he does without asking. For what he becomes, without permission. We all talk about freedom, but none of us is free. He is. He cuts himself free, piece by piece. And each time he bleeds, but he doesn't scream."

Ubbe was silent. The words hung heavy between them, like smoke that won't dissipate. "He's not human anymore," said Ubbe. "No," said Hvitserk. "But maybe that was never the goal."

The fire crackled. Sparks rose, extinguished in the darkness. Hvitserk watched them go. "Do you know what the worst part is?" "What?" "I sometimes wish I were like him. Cold enough to be real."

Ubbe shook his head, stood up, went to the fire, and added wood. "It's not real. It's empty." "Empty?" "Yes. Empty, and he's filling it with force." "And what are you filling yourself with?" Hvitserk asked quietly. Ubbe didn't answer.

Outside, someone called, a dog barked, then silence again. Hvitserk lay back, looking up at the ceiling. "He was always the smallest of us. But somehow also

the greatest." "Greatness is nothing without limits," murmured Ubbe. "Then he was never small enough to have them."

The wind blew through the hall, making the flames flicker. Hvitserk closed his eyes and said quietly, "He is what we will become when we finally stop being afraid." Ubbe didn't answer. He just stared into the fire, as if he might find another brother within it—one who was still human.

The morning smelled of smoke and cold salt. The sea was still, as if holding its breath. I stood at the edge of the cliffs again, the wind gusting through my hair, biting my skin. Behind me, Kattegat slept, dreaming of gods, gold, and glory. I was no longer dreaming. I was awake, so lucid it almost hurt.

I thought of my brothers. Of their voices, of their hands, of the nights we swore to take the world. Now they were there, yet far away. Blood had bound us, but the fire had separated us. And I knew: This was right.

I looked at my hands. Calloused, scarred, cracked. Hands that had taken more than they had held. Brotherly hands, only mine had never learned to be gentle. I whispered softly, "You call me brother, but I was never yours. I was just the knife you needed."

The wind howled over the rocks. I raised the axe and looked at the blade. Flaked, blunt, but honest. It didn't lie. I liked things that were honest. They kill, but they do it without meaning to. People are complicit.

I thought of Hvitserk—the fear in his eyes, the pity he called love. I thought of Ubbe—the reason that paralyzed him. They both wanted to save what had long since burned. I smiled. "Don't save me," I murmured. "I've been saved long ago."

Down on the beach, fires burned. Fishermen were getting ready, life went on. I watched them, silently. I knew one day they would tell me as a story. Not as a hero, not as a brother, but as something they only dared to whisper at night. I was okay with that.

I sat down on a rock, the axe beside me, and looked at the sky. Clouds drifted, slowly, lazily. The sun tried to break through, but couldn't. I liked that. Half-light is more honest than bright light. It shows that the world can't make up its mind. I can.

I took a handful of dirt and let it trickle through my fingers. Black, damp, cold. "This is family," I said quietly. "That which remains when everything else is gone." I laughed softly, harshly. No cynicism, no pain. Only recognition.

Someone called my name behind me. I didn't turn around. I knew who it was. I said, "Stay where you are." The call died down. I heard footsteps, then silence. I took a deep breath and looked back at the sea.

"I loved you," I said quietly. "But love was never enough." I placed my hand on my heart. It beat calmly, evenly. "I don't need any more brotherly hands," I whispered. "I have the fire. And that's enough."

Then I stood up, leaned on the axe, and walked down the slope. The wind grew stronger, the sky darker, but I felt calm within. I knew where I had to go. Not to the gods, not to men—but to where the fire laughs when no one is looking.

And as Kattegat awoke behind me, I continued walking, slowly, step by step, toward the smoke. For smoke was the sign that something was alive, because it was burning.

The smell of iron

The fog came off the sea, heavy and damp, like a breath of the gods after too much mead. I walked slowly, each step a noise in the mud that sounded as if the earth wanted to keep me. I laughed softly. "Not yet," I said. "I still have work to do."

The air was different here. Thicker. Heavier. It smelled of iron. Not metal, but blood. Fresh, sharp, sweet. I knew that smell. It never came by chance. When the land smelled like that, it meant someone somewhere had started dying.

I stopped and looked around. Fog everywhere. No voices, no animals, no movement. Only that smell, slowly eating into my skin. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. There it was – the old song. No sound, just that feeling in my stomach when violence is in the air. Some call it fear. I call it home.

I continued uphill, the wind stronger, the fog thinner. Above, I saw it: smoke. Dark, sluggish, broad. No campfire, no hearth. It was smoke from a fire. I smiled. "So there you are."

I drew my axe. Not because I had to, but because it felt wrong without it. The metal was cold, but honest. I ran my finger along the edge until blood came. A small sacrifice, a greeting. I said quietly, "It's me again."

The slope led to a clearing, burned, devastated. Houses blackened, earth torn up, bodies in the snow. No more screams, only ravens. I knew this scene. I'd been there often enough. But this time it was different. I hadn't done it. Not yet.

I walked through the remains, looked at faces that were no longer faces. Men, women, children. It hadn't been a war. It was rage. Raw, stupid, human. I squatted down, took a handful of blood-snow. It stuck to my fingers. I smelled it. Iron. Pure, clear, like a promise.

A branch cracked behind me. I didn't turn around. "Come out," I said. "I know you're here." Two figures emerged from the fog. Young men, hardly men. Shivering, dirty, weapons loosely held. One whispered, "Are you one of them?" I grinned. "Depends on who 'they' are."

They looked at each other, one of them taking a step forward. "They came at night. Burned everything. Tell me you're not one of them." I slowly stood up. "I'm not one of anyone."

They looked at me uncertainly. One pointed at my axe. "You look like someone who laughs when things get tough." I nodded. "Depends on what's burning."

They didn't know what to do with me. I liked that. When people can't place you, they start to doubt themselves. I said, "Who did this?" "An army," said the older man. "From the East. Men with red banners and black shields. They're taking villages. Killing everything. Even animals."

I grinned. "Then we're alike." He stared at me. "Are you helping us?" I shrugged. "I'm not helping anyone. But maybe by helping you, I'm helping myself."

They didn't understand, but they nodded. Hunger understands every offer. I looked at the charred houses, the smoke slowly fading. I smelled the iron again, strong, sweet, numbing. I thought: War is coming, whether you like it or not.

I turned to them. "Show me where they are." The younger one hesitated. "Why?" I grinned. "Because I want to smell if you're right."

We set off, three shadows in the fog. And as we moved through the cold, dead land, I knew something new was beginning. Not a war for power. Not a war for gods. A war that already knew my name.

We found them at the edge of the forest, in a pit they thought was shelter. There were only a few of them—five, maybe six. Old men with eyes that saw more of the past than the present, two women, a boy, and a girl. The boy held a knife too big for his hand. I looked at him and knew he had already hit someone with it. Perhaps out of necessity, perhaps out of fear. It didn't matter.

I stepped closer. One of the old men raised his head. "Are you one of them?" I grinned. "Depends on what you mean by 'them'." He looked at me, for a long time, with that look that only men have who have seen everything and still keep breathing. "You smell of blood." I nodded. "I smell of life."

He spat into the dirt. "You call this life?" I looked around—charred trees, corpses, smoke, silence. "This is more honest than anything that breathes."

The girl cried quietly. I didn't like that. Children should scream, not whisper. Screams are honest. Quiet crying is the language of those who already know no one is coming. I went to her and knelt down. "What's your name?" She looked away, mumbled something. I didn't understand. I smiled. "It doesn't matter. Names are just noise. What matters is that you still have teeth." She looked at me, scared, confused. I said, "If you want to live, learn to bite."

The boy stood up, the knife trembling in his hand. "Leave her alone!" I grinned. "I'm not doing anything. Not yet." He pointed at my hatchet. "You're like the others!" I nodded. "Maybe. Only more honest."

He wanted to say something, but the old man put his hand on his shoulder. "Leave it," he said. "That one has already seen death. He smells of it." I laughed quietly. "I'm not death. I'm just what's left when he's finished."

They were silent. I looked at them for a long time. Their faces, their bodies, the way they breathed—everything was on low. No courage, no faith, just this raw survival. I understood that. I had been exactly the same. Only I had stopped pretending it was worth anything.

I asked, "Where have they gone?" The old man pointed east. "Where the land becomes flat. They keep moving, always moving. They kill everything that doesn't kneel." I nodded. "Then I'll get up."

He looked at me suspiciously. "Why?" I grinned. "Because I can."

I stood up, pulled the axe from my belt, and wiped dirt from the edge. "Stay here," I said. "If you're lucky, they won't find you. If you're unlucky, they'll find me first." The boy stepped forward. "What are you doing?" "I'll go where it smells."

He shook his head. "You're crazy." I laughed. "No. I'm awake."

I turned around and started walking. The fog had lifted, the light was pale, almost white. Behind me, the quiet sobs, the breathing of the old woman, the clang of the knife the boy dropped. All sounds I knew. Sounds that remain when life is only an echo.

I continued walking. The ground became softer, the smell stronger. Iron, blood, smoke, fear—everything mingled, becoming a language only I understood. I knew what it was telling me: It's starting again.

I smiled. "Then let's get started."

I heard them before I saw them. That dull, steady sound of many men walking in unison over earth. Not a rhythm like in a song, more like the heart of a dead god refusing to stop. I crept deeper into the undergrowth; the fog had grown thinner, the light harsher.

They came from the East, just as the old man had said. Two dozen, maybe more. Tall men, furs, shields with black symbols, faces that had seen it all. Some were laughing. Others were chewing. War satisfies before it leaves you hungry.

I stayed still, watching them. Their movements, the way they breathed, their hands on the handle. No hesitation. No fear. They killed because it was easier than thinking. I liked that. Honest men. And yet, as I looked at them longer, this cold, creeping feeling arose within me—no terror, no pity. Only recognition. I was one of them. I was the one they were looking for, without knowing it.

The one in front stopped and turned his head. "I know you're there," he said in a rough Nordic accent.

I grinned. "Then I'll save myself the sneaking." I stepped out of the fog, the axe loosely held in my hand. They looked at me, and for a moment everything was silent. Then the laughter began. "That's him?" one shouted. "The Boneless One?" "Half a man," said another. "But with a whole mouth."

I grinned wider. "One that's bitten more than you'll ever grasp."

The leader stepped forward. Tall, broad, his face covered in scars. No boy, no fool. He'd seen men die before, and he liked it. "What's your name?" "Ivar," I said. "And you?" He grinned. "The one who puts you in the ground." I nodded. "Then do it properly."

He drew his sword, a broad, blunt thing that hacked more than cut. I liked it. An honest weapon. I held my axe, felt the weight, felt the wind hitting my face. And then it began.

He came first. No hesitation. I dodged, the axe deep, cutting through flesh, feeling the blow all the way to my shoulder. Blood spurted, warm, living. Another came, from the right. I turned, parried, and hit him in the throat. Not a sound. Just that whistling sound when air escapes from a person. I laughed. Not loudly. Just enough to hear.

Then there were more. I fell, got up again, slipped in the dirt, smelled blood, heard screams. Everything blended together. No thought, only movement. Blows. Breathing. Pain. Life. I felt the fire within me awaken again, that cold, clear burning that needs no god. I was neither human nor animal. I was what remains when both become exhausted.

One hit me in the side, and I fell to my knees, gasping. He grinned. "You're bleeding." I spat blood. "I'm smiling, too." Then I hit him with the axe, across, deep. He fell. The others hesitated. I slowly stood up. My legs trembled, but I stood. I looked at them, smiling. "Come on," I said. "See what's left."

They didn't come. One stepped back. Then another. I knew what they saw—not a warrior, not a king. Just a man who had died too many times to even notice. I looked into their eyes, and there it was—the reflection. The same emptiness, the same rage, the same longing for meaning. I hated them because they were real.

I approached, panting, bleeding. "You smell like me," I said. "And that is your curse." The leader lay on the ground, blood seeping from his neck. He smiled, panting. "You're not human," he whispered. I nodded. "I know."

I leaned over him, looked into his dead eyes. No hate. No peace. Only the end. I whispered, "I am your mirror, and you are broken."

Then I stood up, axe in hand, the air thick with the smell of iron. I took a deep breath. The war had found me. And I smiled.

The snow had turned white again. At least in the places where it wasn't bleeding anymore. I stood in the middle of the clearing, the axe still in my hand, and everything around me was silent. No birds, no wind, no sound, only my breathing. Heavy, warm, visible.

I smelled the iron again, stronger than before. It hung in the air like a memory that refuses to fade. Blood, sweat, smoke. Everything that made life honest. I walked slowly among the bodies. Some lay still, some still twitching. I stepped over them without looking. The ground was soft, muddy with death. I grinned. "You did well," I said quietly. "It's almost a shame."

I stopped and wiped the blade on a dead man's cloak. The blood was dark, thick. It was sticky. I looked at my hands—chapped, open, red. They trembled slightly, not with fear, but with life. The trembling that remains when the body realizes it's still there. I liked the feeling. It was honest.

I sat down on a rock, the axe between my knees, looking down at what were once human beings. I thought: So this is war. No glory, no song, no nodding God. Just men falling because they were too proud to remain silent. I laughed quietly. "We're all equally stupid."

My breath steamed. I leaned back, feeling my body slowly calm down. Every wound throbbed, every muscle screamed, but it wasn't pain that bothered me. It was memory. The body doesn't forget, it just tells its story differently. I listened to it.

I remembered the ancient warriors who said: Pain is a test. I never believed that. For me, pain was proof. Proof that you are not empty. I raised my hand, looked at the blood still clinging to it. "Proof enough," I whispered.

The wind came back, cold, clean. It carried the smell with it—iron, death, fire. I inhaled it deeply. It burned my nose, tasted metallic. I liked that. The taste of pain was the taste of truth. No honey, no mead, no comfort. Only what remains when everything else is gone.

I looked at the axe. It had become blunt, broken at the edges, but it had survived. Just like me. I ran my thumb over the edge, cutting myself slightly. A thin, clear line of blood. I smiled. "See," I said to myself, "we're still bleeding. So we're alive."

In the distance, I heard a crow, then silence. I saw the sky. Gray, empty, vast. I wondered if the gods saw this. Then I laughed. "If they do, it's only to know how it's done right."

I slowly stood up, the axe heavy in my hand, my legs aching but carrying me. I walked among the dead, looking for no one, missing no one. I was none of them, but I was what they all could have been if they hadn't been afraid.

When I reached the edge of the woods, I stopped and looked back. The snow glittered in the pale light, and the smoke rose slowly upward, calmly, as if nothing had happened. I nodded. "That's right," I said. "No witness, no judge, no applause."

I continued on, step by step, each step a new echo. Behind me, the land smelled of iron. Ahead of me lay only more of it. I knew the war was bigger than this. But that didn't bother me. I wasn't fighting armies. I was fighting oblivion.

I felt my heart beating. Slowly, calmly, steadily. It was the only rhythm I still trusted. I smiled. "As long as you're beating," I whispered, "I know there's still something to kill."

Then I moved on, into the wind, into the smell, into what was to come. And the land behind me was silent.

Night came quickly. No stars, just a gray sky and that endless white that swallows everything. I dragged myself through the snow, up the slope, until I found a hollow. Protected from the wind, dry enough to stay. I dropped down, the axe beside me, and breathed. Every breath burned in my chest, warm, sharp, alive.

I made a fire. I had gathered wood from the edge of the forest; it was wet, but it burned because I could force it to. The smoke rose slowly, scratching my throat. I liked it. Smoke is like memories: burns briefly, lingers long.

I took off my coat and saw the wounds on my side. Nothing deeper, just scratches, cuts, bruises. I washed the blood away with snow, which burned like fire on open skin. I grinned. "Nice," I whispered. "It's nice that I can still feel it."

I held my hands to the fire, looked at them. Cracked, red, scarred. Hands that don't pray, don't ask, only take. I thought of the past, of Kattegat, of Mother, of brothers. Back then, I fought to live. Now, I lived to fight. I saw it clearly before

me, as clear as the fire. No goal, no prize, just this state where pain is all that keeps you awake.

I took a stone and sharpened the axe, slowly, evenly. The sound calmed me. Metal on stone, sparks flying. I spoke softly, without realizing I was doing it: "Fighting is not a means. Fighting is an end."

The wind picked up, the fire flickered, sparks rose. I saw them dance, bright for a moment, then black. Like men in war. I smiled. Not out of joy, but out of recognition. I was no longer searching for anything. I was what others seek when everything else is gone.

I put the axe aside and stretched out, my back against the earth. Cold, hard, honest. Above me, the sky, gray, deep. I closed my eyes, listened to my heartbeat. Slow, heavy, steady. I liked the sound. It was the only song I still believed in.

I thought of all the faces I had seen. Dead, living, my brothers, my enemies. Everything blurred, became one. I felt my body grow tired, but my mind was awake. Too awake. I knew if I fell asleep now, I wouldn't be dreaming. I would only hear: iron, blood, fire.

I whispered into the darkness: "I am not a weapon. I am life that became a weapon." The wind didn't answer. The fire crackled.

I turned on my side, pulled my coat over me, and kept the axe within easy reach. I smiled, my eyes half-closed. "That's better," I said. "No gods, no goal. Just me and what's to come."

Then I took a deep breath, smelled the smoke, the iron, the frost. And I knew: I would get up again. Not because I wanted to. But because I had no choice.

I woke before day came. It was the kind of awakening that doesn't end a dream, but a warning. No light, no sound—just the feeling that something was there. I lay still, my breathing shallow, the axe in my hand, hidden beneath the covers. The wind had died down, but between the gusts I heard them: footsteps. Slow, cautious, close.

I smelled them before I saw them. Iron, sweat, fear. Fear always smells the same—sweet, warm, almost human. I smiled. "So there you are," I whispered.

I stood up, quietly, like an animal that had long since learned that movement can kill. The fog was back, thicker than yesterday. It lay like a blanket over

everything, making the world smaller. I liked that. Small worlds are easier to destroy.

The footsteps came closer. Two, maybe three. Heavy, but uncertain. I tensed my fingers around the hilt. Then I saw them. Shadows, barely more than outlines. One had a sword, the other a spear. Young faces, too clean. Men who still thought war was an adventure. I took a deep breath and stepped out of the hollow. "Are you looking for me?"

They froze. One raised his weapon, the other hesitated. "Who are you?" asked the one with the sword. I grinned. "The one you wanted to find."

The boy with the spear took a step back. "We have nothing against you!" "Then you're stupid," I said. "In war, everyone has something against everyone else."

I approached them slowly, the axe held loosely, as if in conversation. They looked at each other, whispering, unsure whether to flee or fight. I felt their fear, hanging in the air like fog. I said quietly, "You're too late. The war already has you."

Then came the blow. Not from me, from them. The one with the sword screamed and ran. I dodged, kicked him in the chest, and watched him fall. The spear came from the left, cutting my shoulder. I felt the pain, but it was far away, dull, pleasant. I grabbed the shaft, pulled, and tore it to the ground. The axe fell, struck, and ended.

The boy with the sword lay in the snow, panting, bleeding, but alive. I knelt beside him and reached into his collar. "How old are you?" He looked at me, tears and blood on his face. "Sixteen." I nodded. "Old enough to die. Too young to understand."

I let go of him, stood up, and stepped back. He stared at me as if I were the last thing he ever wanted to see. I looked at him as if he were the first thing I'd seen too many times. Then I turned around.

He shouted, "Why?" I stopped without turning around. "Because the war found me first."

I went back to my camp. The fire was almost out. I sat down, picked up some snow, and wiped the blood from my hands. It turned pink and ran between my fingers. I watched it, silently.

I thought of the sound of a hatchet hitting flesh. It's not a scream. It's a short, honest sound, like a yes that no one wants to hear. I liked that. Honest sounds don't lie.

I looked up at the sky. Gray, empty, indifferent. I said quietly, "You're not coming to me, war. You're already here." Then I laid the axe beside me and closed my eyes. No sleep. Only that brief, quiet darkness that feels like peace, but isn't.

And in the distance, somewhere beyond the fog, I heard footsteps again. New ones. More. Heavier. The war still smelled of iron. I smiled. "All right," I whispered. "Then let's do it right."

The day dawned as if someone had reluctantly torn it open. No sunrise, no gold, no promise. Only light, pale and cold, creeping across the land like an animal seeking its prey. I stood there, axe in hand, and smelled what was coming. Iron. Sweat. Blood. Everything mingled, everything was familiar. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and for a moment it felt as if the world was breathing with me.

The footsteps came closer. Heavy, steady. No boys this time. Men. Warriors. I heard their voices, muffled, raw, full of hunger. No anger. No pride. Only hunger. This is what war smells like when it grows old. I knew they would find me. I didn't want to run. I wanted to see if they had the courage to stay when death stared them straight in the face.

I knelt down and placed my hand on the ground. It vibrated slightly. The sound of marching, of weapons, of intent. I smiled. "That's music," I whispered. "The only one that still means something to me."

I stood up, slowly, painfully, but surely. My legs trembled, my side burned. I looked into the distance, through the fog, and then I saw them—black shields, red banners, faces that no longer knew any doubt. Maybe a hundred men. Maybe more. It didn't matter.

I gripped my axe tighter, feeling the weight, the balance, the old, familiar feeling. I thought: It's no longer a tool. It's part of me. I and the axe, we are the same—blunt, tired, but still deadly.

The first scream came from them. One raised his sword and ran. Then the second. Then all of them. A roar of throats, metal, earth. I waited until they

were close. I wanted to see that—the faces, the moment when courage turns to fear.

I stepped forward, raised the axe, and the world became small. No sky, no ground, no tomorrow. Just me and them, the breathing, the hammering, the roaring. The first fell. Then the second. I don't remember how many. I didn't count. I struck because I breathed. I breathed because I struck.

The blood spurted, warm, honest. I smelled the iron again, sweet, thick, familiar. I tasted it as if it were wine. I laughed, loudly, rawly, the way only someone laughs who has nothing left to lose. And in that laughter was everything—anger, joy, memory, emptiness.

I felt blades slashing at me. Shoulder, arm, leg. It didn't matter. My body was just a shell. I had long since become something else. I was the blow itself. The sound. The smell. I was what remained when death was satiated.

Then it fell silent. No more screams, no more footsteps, no wind. Just me, kneeling, breathing, bleeding. Around me was what was once life. I smelled the iron, more strongly than ever before. It was everywhere. On my skin. In my throat. In the air. I smiled. "This is what eternity smells like," I said quietly.

I dropped the axe and looked at my hands—open, bloody, trembling. Brother's hands, warrior's hands, murderer's hands. All the same. I closed them, clenched my fists, felt the trembling. Not weakness—memory.

I looked up. The sky was gray, the fog thinning. And then, for the first time in a long time, I felt peace. No god, no song, no victory. Only this knowledge: I am the scent that remains when everything else fades away.

I laughed quietly, almost gently. "I am the iron," I whispered. "And the iron never forgets."

Then I moved on, step by step, through the fog, through the blood, into what was to come. And behind me remained only the smell.

Nobody calls me a cripple

I walked along the path leading north. The snow had become harder, the wind sharper. Every step burned, every breath cut. But I liked that. Pain was honest. Pain didn't ask if you could. It tested if you wanted to. And I still wanted to.

My body felt like an old wagon whose wheels have long since become crooked, but which keeps rolling because no one has the courage to stop it. My legs no longer fully obeyed me. They were tired, tough, and stubborn. I pulled myself on, on my hands and knees, with the remnants of pride that no one could ever take away from me.

Once I just lay there, in the middle of the snow. The sky was pale, empty, cold. I looked up and thought: This must be what it looks like when the gods sleep. No lightning, no sign. Just silence. I grinned. "You're quiet," I whispered. "So listen: no one calls me a cripple."

I stood up, slowly, with that anger that is old yet fresh. I remembered the past—the looks, the voices, the pity that was worse than mockery. "The poor boy," they said. "He'll never fight." I fought.

"He'll never walk." I crawled. "He'll never live." I'm still alive. And she's not.

I continued walking, step by step, and every sound of my limbs sounded like mockery, like memory, like revenge. I thought of the faces of all those who had laughed. I thought of their mouths, their teeth, their blood. And I thought that no one laughs anymore when they look down at the ground and see me there, the one who was never meant to be standing.

I came to a frozen stream. The water beneath the ice was dark, viscous, almost black. I looked into it, saw my reflection. The face had grown older. Harder. The eyes emptier. But the look was the same. I grinned. "You look good, cripple." The reflection grinned back. I slammed my fist against the ice. It cracked. Water shot up, ice-cold, honestly. I let my hand rest in it, feeling nothing. No pain. Just the weight of everything.

I sat down at the edge, pulled the axe from my belt, and placed it beside me. I looked at the blade, blunt and jagged, but still reflective. I saw myself in it, as if through an old memory. I said quietly, "I don't need legs to stand. I just need ground."

The wind blew across the field, bringing snow with it. I let it come. I let it sweep over me, cold, biting, merciless. I thought: If this is the verdict, then I deserve it. But no verdict makes me small as long as I can laugh.

I raised the axe and held it up to the sky. "Do you see that?" I shouted into the wind. "That's me! That which you couldn't break!" The wind didn't answer, but it carried my words with it. And that was enough.

I stood up again, heavily but surely. Every step a curse, every movement a testament. I was tired, I was sore, but I was there. And that was more than most people could say.

I grinned, quietly, almost peacefully. "No one calls me a cripple," I whispered. "Only I can call myself that. And I call myself Ivar."

Then I continued on, through the wind, through the ice, through the voices that had long since fallen silent. And beneath every step the earth cracked, as if it agreed with me.

I saw him from afar, on the road leading west. A big guy, as broad as a gatepost, his fur open, an axe over his shoulder. He came toward me, and I already knew what would happen. Men like him didn't see men like me. They only saw what they lacked to feel greater.

He stopped when we met. His shadow fell over me. He looked me up and down, that half-grin on his face that always reeked of trouble. "You there," he said, "need help?" I looked at him calmly, without getting up. "If I wanted help, you wouldn't notice."

He laughed, loudly, that clumsy, superfluous laugh that takes up more space than it's worth. "You're a long way from Kattegat, little one. And the snow eats men who can't stand." I nodded. "Then he'll have plenty to eat."

He grinned wider. "What's your name?" "Ivar," I said. "The Boneless One?" "Depends on who asks." "Someone who likes to laugh," he said. "Someone who believes men with legs rule the world." I smiled. "Then you're one of those who loses them."

He came closer, stopped directly in front of me. "I heard you're something special," he said. "But now that I see you..." He left the sentence open, like one leaves a trap open. I looked at him calmly, my hands loosely on the axe. "What do you see?" I asked. "Half a man." I nodded. "Then you see twice as much as I need."

He laughed again, louder, more forced. Then he leaned toward me, so close I could smell his breath—mead, sweat, arrogance. "Tell me, Boneless," he whispered, "how does it feel to have the world looking down on you?" I grinned. "Depends on how long it survives when it does."

He wanted to say something else, but it was already over. I moved faster than he thought. A jerk, a grip, a blow with the axe handle against his knee. He fell, the giant, with a sound like pride breaking. I was on top of him before he could catch his breath. The axe at his throat. His gaze – surprised, confused, angry. I grinned. "Now look up."

He gasped. "Kill me." I shook my head. "No. I want you to live. So you can tell the story of being brought down by half a man."

I stood up, the axe loosely in my hand. He remained lying there, holding his bleeding leg. I turned around and continued walking, slowly, calmly. He called after me: "Cripple!" I stopped without turning around. "Knees are for others," I said quietly. "I don't need them to stand over you."

Then I moved on. The wind carried his cursing away. I smiled, and the smile was genuine. Not because I had won, but because I knew who I was again.

I wasn't the cripple they saw. I was proof that you can walk without legs if your will is stronger than the ground.

And in the distance, between the snow and smoke, I thought I heard Ragnar's voice. A short, ragged laugh. No pride. No pity. Just this quiet: "That's how it's done, son."

I continued walking, and the snow crunched under my hands like applause.

I arrived in the village shortly before dusk. Smoke over the huts, dogs barking, children running, women with downcast eyes. Everything as usual. Only the looks were different. I saw them as they saw me – half awe, half fear. No one knows how to react when encountering a legend that still lives.

An old man stood by the well, his hands chapped, his eyes tired. He saw me and paused. "Ivar," he said, quietly, like a prayer no one should hear. I nodded. "Still." He looked at my legs, then back at my face. "You're alive." "More than most," I said.

People slowly approached. First children, then women, then men. A wave of suspicion and curiosity. I sensed their thoughts, those quiet questions that no

one wanted to ask out loud:*How can someone live like that? How can someone kill like that? How can someone who cannot walk get this far?*

A boy stepped forward, barely older than ten. "Are you really the Boneless One?" I grinned. "If you don't believe me, you can try to find out." He backed away, his mother pulling him toward her. I laughed softly. "It's okay. I only bite when you pray."

A man stepped forward, tall, strong, with a face that had seen too much sun and too little sleep. "What do you want here?" he asked. I looked at him calmly. "Nothing." "Then go." "I'm already here."

He gritted his teeth. "We don't need cripples here." I nodded slowly, smiling. "Then you already have too many mirrors."

He tried to say something, but it was too late. I grabbed him by the fur and pulled him down, my axe at his throat, so fast that even the dogs fell silent. "Say that word again," I whispered, "and you'll learn what it's like to have the ground talk about you."

He trembled, silent. I looked into his eyes, empty, stupid, human. I whispered, "I'm not a cripple. I'm the sword you all fear, because it reminds you how weak you truly are."

I let him go. He fell into the snow, panting, humiliated, alive. I looked at the crowd. No one moved. Only the wind blew through the village, carrying the scent of fire, fear, and respect.

I stood up as best I could and said loudly so they all heard: "You call me Boneless because I'm different. But you all have bones, and none of you have ever done anything with them. I have none, and I built an empire out of them."

Silence. Not a word, not a breath. Only the flame of a torch, hissing. I raised the axe and showed it to them. "This is my leg, my voice, my faith. I don't need feet to stand on. I just need a reason. And you aren't one."

I continued through the crowd. No one moved. Some looked away, others nodded, silently, like men who suddenly understand that strength has nothing to do with the body. When I reached the edge of the village, I turned around. "If any of you want to know what it means to live, then let them learn to crawl. Only then will you understand how to stand."

Then I continued on, into the darkness. Behind me, someone whispered my name. Not as a curse. Not as a mockery. But as a prayer. And that was enough.

I built a fire at the edge of the forest, where the village was just a flickering blur. The wind had died down, but the cold remained, sharp as glass. I sat there, alone, the axe beside me, and stared into the flames until the world was reflected in them. Fire tells stories, if you look long enough. And I had time.

I pulled my coat aside, examined my body. Old wounds, new wounds, scars that looked like maps. Paths that had led me to where I sat now. I ran my hand over a deep scar on my side that felt like a forgotten memory. "This," I whispered, "was when I thought the pain would break me." I laughed softly. "It didn't."

I stretched out my legs, looked at them—thin, disobedient, unreliable. I remembered all the times they had let me down, all the times I had fallen, crawled, cursed, and crawled on. I thought of Mother carrying me, of the men laughing. I thought of the first time I realized that pity is worse than hate.

"I don't owe you anything," I said quietly, to my legs, to my body, to everything that ever wanted to hinder me. "You are not a burden. You are a weapon."

I leaned forward, holding my hands over the flame. The light trembled on my fingers, making them golden, almost alive. I counted the scars. One on my hand, two on my arm, three across my chest, four on my shoulder. I heard my heart beating, slow but strong. It was the only part of me that had never lied.

"Every scar," I said, "is an oath. Every wound is proof that I haven't given up. And you call me a cripple?" I laughed loudly, harshly, genuinely. The echo reverberated through the trees.

I took the axe, turned it in my hand, and examined the blade. Jagged, blunt, honest. I saw myself in it, flickering, broken, but there. "I am what remains when pain becomes king."

The wind blew over the fire, making sparks dance. I watched them until they burned out. I thought: Gods, kings, heroes—all lie. Only the pain remains. And if you bear it long enough, you learn that it is not punishment, but crowning glory.

I reached into the snow and pressed it against a wound that was still open. It burned. I grinned. "Thus speaks my throne," I whispered. "No gold, no stone. Only flesh that does not die."

I looked up at the sky. No star. No sign. Only darkness. I raised my hand, pointing it at the void. "Do you see that?" I said. "That's power. When no one's looking anymore and you keep going anyway."

The fire crackled, the snow fell softly, and for the first time in days, I felt something almost like peace. Not the peace you earned, but the peace you forced. I lay back, watched the light flicker through my eyelids, heard the fire breathing.

I said quietly, "I'm not a cripple. I'm what happens when God makes a mistake—and the mistake decides to overthrow gods."

Then I closed my eyes. No sleep, no dreams. Only this feeling: I am. And that's enough.

The morning was quiet. Only the crackling of frozen wood and the soft dripping of melted snow from the roof of the world. I sat there, the fire almost out, the embers faint but alive. I warmed my hands as best I could and thought: Every day is a war. Only without the drums.

Then I heard footsteps. Heavy, measured, old. No enemy. No hunter. Just someone who knew how to come without stealth. I turned my head and saw him—tall, gray, his skin tanned by the wind, his eyes full of stories. A sword at his side, but blunt, like himself.

"Ivar," he said. I nodded. "Depends on who's asking." He smiled crookedly. "Someone too old to fight and too proud to pray." I grinned. "Then you're like me."

He sat down opposite me, heavy, creaking, like wood left in the rain too long. For a while, no one spoke. Only the wind spoke. Then he took a sip from a small leather skin and handed it to me. "Mead. Old, but warm." I drank. It tasted of rust and memories. "What do you want?" He looked into the fire. "People in the village are talking about you." I laughed softly. "Don't they always?" "They say you're a demon. Others say you're blessed." I nodded. "Both are true. I'm proof that the gods are allowed to make mistakes."

He smiled, slowly, wearily. "They're afraid of you." I looked at him. "Then they understand me better than I thought."

He remained silent, warming his hands. I liked his silence. It was the honest silence of a man who no longer has anything to prove. After a while, he said, "They also say you spared him." "Who?" "The man from the market. The one

who called you a cripple." I grinned. "I gave him something better than death." "Humiliation?" "Living with truth."

He nodded, looked at me, those eyes, gray as steel. "Why didn't you kill him?" I stared into the fire. "Because fear lasts longer."

He nodded, slowly, as if he knew that. "Fear is not honor." I grinned. "Yes, it is. It is the most honest form of respect. No one fears what they despise. They fear what they understand."

He laughed softly, scratching his beard. "You talk like someone who's grown old." "I'm not old," I said. "I just stayed up late."

The wind shifted, the fire flickered, a spark burned his hand. He didn't flinch. Men like him never flinch. "You know," he said after a while, "they'll follow you if you call them." I shook my head. "I won't call anyone. Whoever wants to follow should do so because they have to, not because I want to." "And if no one follows?" I looked at him. "Then I'll go alone. Like always."

He nodded and slowly stood up, his sword clanging. "You are not what they say, Ivar. You are worse." I laughed quietly. "That's the nicest thing anyone has said to me today."

He turned to leave. "They'll be whispering your name for a long time." I grinned. "Then they'll finally have learned something: volume is for those who lie."

He paused briefly, half-turned. "And if they call you a cripple again?" I looked at him calmly. "Then let them. But let them say it with a trembling voice."

He nodded and left. The wind carried his scent—leather, age, honor. I watched him until he disappeared into the white. Then I looked back at the fire. It burned dimly, but it burned.

I said quietly, "Respect is not a gift. It's the taste that remains when fear evaporates."

Then I added more wood, heard the crackling, and thought: The fire understands me better than any human.

I stayed sitting long after the old man had left. The fire was almost out, but the embers lived on, red, tough, unwilling to die. I liked that. That's how I wanted to be—small, inconspicuous, but too hot to step on.

The wind had died down. The snow was falling again, quietly, wearily. I heard the world breathing, slowly, heavily. And somewhere in between was my name. Ivar. No title, no prayer, no curse. Just a sound that lingered when all others had stopped.

I thought of the village. The faces, the fear, the whispers. I had seen it, heard it, smelled it. Fear has a smell—like cold sweat and burnt mead. I knew it well. I preferred it to love. Love wants something. Fear simply understands.

I stood up, pulled the axe from the snow, and wiped off the soot. My legs were weak, but they obeyed. Enough for what was to come. I looked toward the village. Smoke, light, voices. Life. But none that remains without guidance.

"I'm tired of walking," I said aloud, as if the wind were listening. "Perhaps it's time to stop."

I started walking slowly, each step a small confession. I felt the ground beneath me, felt the earth absorb my movements. I thought: I belong here. Not because they want me, but because I'll stay until they believe it.

When I reached the edge of the village, it was still early. Children were playing in the snow, women were carrying wood, men were looking at me the way one might watch a storm approaching too close to ignore. I stopped, letting them look at me. Not a word, not a greeting. Just eyes.

Then I said, "I didn't come to rule. I came to stay. That's worse."

One laughed nervously. Another spat in the snow. I looked at him until he looked away. "I don't need a crown," I said. "I don't need a hall. I just need your respect. And if you don't have that, then I'll take away your fear. That's more honest."

Silence. Only the cracking of a pile of wood somewhere behind the huts. I stepped forward, my eyes fixed on the crowd. "I've crawled long enough to know how to stand. I've bled enough to know what life means. I have no legs to carry me. So your silence carries me."

A man stepped forward, young and nervous. "What do you want from us?" I grinned. "Nothing. Just that you stop asking me who I am. I am Ivar. The one who stayed."

Then I turned around, walked to an old hut on the edge, and sat down on the steps. The boards creaked, the wind blew through the cracks. I liked the sound. It sounded like approval.

I laid the axe beside me and watched the snow fall. The village was talking again, quietly, cautiously, like someone who realizes they're standing in a church. I smiled. Not out of pride. Out of calm.

"I don't need an empire," I whispered. "Just a border I don't have to cross."

I looked up at the sky. Gray, heavy, but open. "If fear brings order," I said quietly, "then it shall be my law."

Then I stood up, slowly, surely. The snow fell more heavily, but I walked, step by step, through the village. No one spoke to me. No child laughed. Only the wind whispered my name.

And in this silence I built my kingdom. Without a crown. Without grace. Without knees.

The cabin was old. The wood breathed, crackled, and sighed. I sat by the fire, which flickered faintly, and listened to the house breathing. Outside, snow fell, quietly, patiently, indifferently. I liked the sound. It sounded like something that had always been there.

I held my hands over the embers. They were still, calm, almost empty. No more trembling, no more anger. Just this strange feeling that hung somewhere between peace and tiredness. I thought: Maybe this is the price. You get what you want, and then realize it's not enough.

I had them—the fear, the respect, the silence. The village belonged to me, without anyone saying so. They avoided me, they respected me, they bowed in thought as I passed. And yet it was quiet. Too quiet. No life, no laughter, no sound that smelled of humanity. Only order. Cold and perfect.

I looked into the flames, which trembled as if they were trying to tell me something. Maybe it was just the wind. Maybe not. I asked quietly, "Is this sovereignty? When no one objects anymore?" The fire answered with a crackle. I nodded. "I thought so."

I leaned back, my back against the wall, my eyes half-closed. I thought of Kattegat, of my brothers, of the chaos that we were. Noise, blood, pride. And

now this—silence, respect, coldness. I had created order. But order has no pulse.

I reached for the axe, turning it in my hands. The metal was cold, blunt, honest. I saw myself in it—a face smiling, but not knowing why. I said quietly, "I won." The echo of the words hung in the room, weightless. I laughed briefly. "And yet I'm still cold."

I put the axe aside, added wood, and watched the flames grow again. Light on the walls, shadows on my face. I thought: Perhaps this is the last thing that remains—light that no one shares.

Outside, a dog barked. Short, sharp, then silence again. I heard my own breathing, the rushing of my blood. I felt alive, but not warm. It was as if the fire was only reminding me that even flames are lonely when no one is warming themselves by them.

I took a sip of mead, cold and bitter. "Fear rules," I whispered. "But fear doesn't love."

I thought of Mother. Of her hands, of the gaze that understood more than words could. I thought of the nights when she said pain was just the gods' way of testing you. I laughed softly. "Then they must have made me a teacher."

I closed my eyes, heard the crackling of the embers, the distant howl of the wind. I thought: I have everything. And nothing. No God, no friend, no heart beating next to mine. Only this quiet humming beneath my skin that says: It's not over yet.

I opened my eyes and looked into the fire again. The flame had shrunk, but it held. I whispered, "No one calls me a cripple. But no one calls me human."

Then I lay down, my head on my coat, the axe at the ready. The fire hissed, the snow continued to fall outside. And in the darkness, between breath and dream, I missed something that had no name—something warm that had never returned.

Maybe it was grace. Maybe just a memory. Maybe both.

And then I fell asleep—not in peace, but knowing that even the gods sometimes get cold.

Ravens over Kattegat

The morning came gray, like an unwelcome thought. No wind, no snow, just that strange, tense silence you know when there's something in the air that refuses to be named. I sat outside the hut, the axe beside me, and drank cold water from a wooden bowl. It tasted of earth, old and honest.

Then I heard them. First one, then two, then a whole chorus. Ravens. Their wingbeat was dull, like drums from another world. I raised my head. They circled above the treetops—black, loud, alive. I watched them as they descended, closer, purposefully.

One landed in front of me. Large, fat, its feathers dull from winter. It looked at me with those cold, insolent eyes that knew nothing but hunger and truth. I grinned. "What do you want, bird?" It croaked, loudly, harshly. Then it leaped forward, dropping something. A piece of parchment, small, rolled up, bound with a leather cord. I looked at it. "Messenger of the gods?" The raven tilted its head as if laughing. Then it flew away, the rest of the flock behind it, black dust against the gray sky.

I picked up the parchment. My fingers felt the rough leather, slightly damp from the snow. I turned it over, slowly, suspiciously, like touching something foreign that reeks of the past. Then I untied it.

The writing was hasty, crooked, rushed. I read:
Kattegat is burning. The throne is empty. Your brothers are shadows. Come if you still are one.

I read it twice. Then again. The fire inside me wasn't sudden—it was old, dormant, and now awake again. Kattegat. The name tasted of blood, salt, wood, screaming. I felt my fingers tremble. Not with fear. With memory.

I placed the parchment in the fire. It burned quickly, quietly, cleanly. I watched it turn black, disintegrate, disappear. Then I said quietly, "So be it."

I stood up. My body protested, tired, tough, but it obeyed. I grabbed the axe, tested the edge, wiped it across the snow until it gleamed. I knew what that meant. No letter, no call without a price. Kattegat didn't call—it demanded.

I looked north, toward where the sky was darker. I thought of Ragnar's Hall, of Mother, of the brothers who were still alive or pretending to be. I thought of the sea, the harbor, the smell of salt and fire. I thought of home—or what was left of it.

"So back there," I said quietly. "Back where it all began."

I went into the hut, grabbed what was left—the axe, a fur, a small skin of mead, a piece of bread, hard as stone. That's all I needed. I looked around once more. The hut was empty, cold, but it smelled of me. Of fire, blood, and defiance. I smiled. "Hold still, old place. I might not come back."

Then I stepped outside. The snow crunched, the sky was pale, and the ravens circled above me again. I raised the axe. "Show me the way," I said. They answered with a collective cry, raw and loud, like the cries of war from black throats.

And so I set off. Slowly but surely. Not as a cripple. Not as a king. As the one they would have to call when it was too late.

I knew Kattegat wasn't waiting for me. But the fire there knew who I was.

I walked. Not fast, not proudly—just onward. Snow up to my chest, wind in my face, the sky gray as ash. I no longer knew how many days had passed. One turned into another, like breaths you don't count because otherwise you wouldn't be able to.

The ravens were still there. Always. Three, sometimes five, then just one. They kept their distance, but they didn't leave. I saw them above me, black against the white, tireless. I thought: Maybe they're not messengers. Maybe they're witnesses.

I talked to them at some point, because no one else was there. "You're flying," I said, "because you're light. I'm dragging myself because I'm not." One croaked. I grinned. "Yeah, yeah. I know. I should have left earlier."

I paused briefly and looked north. The wind had driven the snow into mounds that looked like graves. I continued anyway. My legs ached, my back burned. Every meter was a battle between will and body. My body was losing, but slowly.

I remembered previous marches. Men, brothers, laughter, blood. Now it was just me, the axe, the cold. I thought: War used to be loud. Now it's silent. But it never ends.

I found a fallen tree and sat down. My breath steamed, my heart pounded. I took a sip from the mead bag, bitter, sharp. I closed my eyes, listened to the

wind. There was something in it. Not a word, not a song. Only this quiet voice saying: *You come back to burn.*

I laughed quietly. "Maybe I'm the fire that's still missing."

I looked at my hands, cracked, chapped, scarred. I remembered the village, the old man, the fear in their faces. I thought: Fear is good. But in Kattegat, fear isn't enough. Kattegat wants blood.

I stood up again, slowly but surely. I felt the snow give way beneath me, soft, tired. I thought of Father. Ragnar. How he laughed when death came too close. I understood him now. Laughter is the last thing you have left when the world is devouring you.

The wind shifted. I smelled salt. Far away, but there. The sea. I knew I was getting closer. The ravens flew lower, louder, restless. I looked at them. "Do you smell it too, bird? The end. Or the beginning."

I continued, step by step, the axe heavy but familiar. Every step was a blow against the doubt. I felt it, that old pain, in my knees, in my back, everywhere. But it was nothing new. I had grown up with it. He was my brother.

Night came quickly, as always in these lands. I didn't light a fire. I didn't need one. I had enough flame within me. I lay down and looked up at the sky. No stars, only black. I whispered, "Kattegat." The word tasted of blood.

A raven landed next to me, so close I could see its eye. Black, shiny, cold. I grinned. "You know what awaits you there?" He tilted his head. "Good," I said. "Then fly ahead."

He did. And I knew I was on my way home again.

I smelled the sea before I saw it. That smell that tastes of life and decay at the same time. Salt, algae, old wood, seaweed, and blood. I stopped for a moment, letting the wind blow into my face. It burned my nose, sharp, honest. I knew I was close.

The snow grew thinner, the land flatter, harder. The ground was damp, muddy, crisscrossed with traces left by the war. Cart wheels, horse hooves, boots. Old, half-blown, but they were there. Signs. Memories. I followed them, step by step, my eyes forward, the ravens above me.

And then I saw it. Kattegat.

The bay lay still, gray, like an open eye. Smoke rose, thin, sluggish, from where fires once burned for celebration. Now nothing burned for joy. Only remnants. I stopped, leaned on the axe, and looked down.

The palisades were broken, the gate half-burned. Boats lay on the shore, tilted, empty, some floating in the water like dead animals. No singing, no noise, no life. Only the wind that cut through wood and iron like old bones.

I took a deep, slow breath. "So this is it," I said quietly. "That's what remains when gods grow tired."

I continued down the slope, the ground slippery but familiar. Every step was a look back. I saw the village as it once was—laughter, fire, voices, the salt in the air, the force of life. And now it was quiet.

A raven flew ahead of me and landed on a post. I looked at him. "Are you sure I should see it?" He croaked. I nodded. "Fine then."

I stepped through the gate. The smell hit me first. Smoke, blood, old grease, cold ash. It was the smell of the end. I walked through the streets, saw charred houses, weapons in the mud, corpses half buried in the snow. Some fresh, some old. No difference anymore. Death always smells the same.

I arrived at the great square. The fountain was empty, the water black. I looked into the hall, what remained of it. The roof was half-collapsed, the throne burned, the stone sooty. I stepped inside.

The air was thick, warm with smoke, old. I saw the spot where Father had sat. Ragnar. And I saw myself lying there as a child, laughing, angry, dreaming. I laughed quietly. "Look at you, Father. Your world doesn't even adhere to your legends."

I walked slowly through the hall, running my hand over the walls, over the charred wood. I felt the grooves, the scars of the fire. Everything bore marks, everything was marked. Just like me. I smiled. "Same blacksmith, different shape."

Outside, a raven cawed again. I looked toward the entrance; the light slanted in, golden and gray at once. Dust danced in it, like memories no one needs anymore.

I knelt down and placed my hand on the ground. Cold, but firm. I whispered, "I'm back."

The hall responded with silence. I liked that. Silence is more honest than cheering.

I stood up, went to the gate, and looked out to sea. The water glittered dully, endlessly, indifferently. I thought: Everything is there. Only the voices are missing. Perhaps this is the curse of the gods—they take away the sound, not the place.

I said quietly, "I heard you, ravens. I'm here. But you didn't tell me what to find."

No one answered. The wind carried only ash. I watched them fly, black against the gray, and thought: Maybe I'm too late. Or just right.

I gripped the axe tighter, feeling the weight, the familiar trembling in my arms. "Then I'll find it myself," I said. "Whatever's still alive here."

And as I walked through the streets of Kattegat, the ravens followed me. Not as signs. As witnesses.

I continued through the streets. No torches, no footsteps, just snow on burnt roofs and a wind that sounded like a whisper. I smelled old grease, cold ash, human fear that had eaten into the wood. Kattegat was dead, but it still stank of life.

Something moved between the huts. At first I thought it was the wind. Then I heard a cough. Soft, hoarse, human. I stopped. "Come out," I said. No response. "I know you're breathing."

A shadow emerged from the darkness. A man, old, thin, with sunken cheeks. He wore scraps of leather that had once been armor. He looked at me, blinking as if looking through fog. "Ivar?" he whispered. I nodded. He staggered back a step as if the wind had pushed him. "By Odin... you're dead." I grinned. "Not thorough enough."

He stared at me for a long time, then fell to his knees. Not out of awe—out of exhaustion. "They said you'd never come back. That you only lived in songs." I laughed quietly. "I never liked the way you sounded in songs."

He coughed, spat blood. "They... they burned it down. Everything. First came the ones from the West, then our own people. No more kings. Just hunger." I looked around. "I see it."

Another shadow emerged from a doorway. A woman, young, but with the eyes of an old animal. She was carrying a child in her arms. I looked at her. She looked back—and her gaze wasn't fear. It was what comes when you're out of tears. "Ivar," she said. "I thought you were a ghost." "Maybe I am." "If you are," she said, "stay. Ghosts keep evil away."

I saw the child. Small, quiet, eyes blue as ice. It stared at me, unblinking. I liked that. "What's its name?" "Sigurd," she said. I grinned. "Good name. Strong. Perhaps it won't die of stupidity."

She said nothing. Only the wind spoke. I stepped closer, looked at the hut behind her. Holes in the roof, walls black with smoke. A bed, a pot, a piece of bread. That was all. "How many of you are there?" I asked. "Not many." "How many gods do you have left?" She smiled bitterly. "None who answers." I nodded. "Then you have me."

The old man looked up. "You want to rule?" I shook my head. "I want Kattegat to breathe. If you want to live, you must be afraid again. Fear brings order. Order brings fire. And fire brings life."

He laughed hoarsely. "You talk like a king." "I don't talk," I said. "I just give orders more clearly than others."

The woman approached cautiously. "Why did you come back?" I looked beyond her, toward the sky where ravens were circling. "Because ravens don't rest when there's no blood."

I turned away and continued through the alleys. Behind me, I heard them whispering. My name was mentioned several times. First quietly, then louder. Not as a prayer, not as a curse. As a fact.

I returned to the large square and stopped. The wind shifted, blowing ash across the ground and settling it over my feet. I said quietly, "Kattegat, you've grown old."

Then I laughed. Not a happy laugh. Not anger. Just the quiet, brittle laugh of a man who knows that everything he loves has long since outlived him.

I turned to the ravens above me and raised the axe. "All right," I said. "If no one believes me anymore, then I'll just do it."

And so Kattegat began to breathe again – with ash in its lungs and fear in its heart.

Night fell heavily over Kattegat. No wind, no snow, just the smell of wet wood and old blood. I sat in the hall that was once the heart of the world and heard the roof creak with every breath. The flames in the fire pit were small, but they were enough. I liked them small. Big fires lie.

I laid the axe beside me and looked into the embers. I knew I wasn't alone. I felt them. Not people—ghosts. Old voices that refused to remain silent. I heard them, faint at first, then clearer. Men, women, children. Shouts, screams, laughter. A past that wasn't dead.

"Ivar," someone whispered. A voice like stone, rough, old. I raised my head. "I know you," I said. "I was here when you left." "And now you are dust." "I am memory." "That's worse."

I closed my eyes and let them talk. One by one. Names, faces, questions.

Why are you back?

Who are you looking for?

What are you still fighting for?

I didn't answer right away. I wanted to hear what they were really saying, between the words. It wasn't a reproach. Not a curse. It was hunger. The dead's hunger for meaning. I understood that. I felt the same.

I stood up and walked slowly through the hall. The floor was uneven, cracked, old. I heard my own echo, as if I were talking to myself. I looked at the charred walls, the shadows cast by the flames. For a moment, I thought I saw Father sitting on the throne. Ragnar. The smile, the eyes, the anger. I stopped.

"Are you proud?" I asked. No answer. Just the crackling of the fire. "Or disappointed?" The wind blew through the roof, and the flame flickered. I nodded. "Both. Of course."

I sat down on the ground, legs stretched out, back against the stone. I looked up through the holes in the roof, where stars appeared—cold, clear, far away. "You up there," I said, "you're no better. You give nothing. You take until nothing remains. And when someone like me is still standing, you call it fate." I laughed harshly. "Fate is just the word the weak use when they're too tired to fight."

I reached for a piece of charred wood, turning it between my fingers. Black, light, dead. I said, "Perhaps you gave me nothing. Perhaps you just took

everything from me until I was left. And that's enough for you. A man without legs, but with teeth. A body that crawls but doesn't fall."

The hall fell silent again. I heard my breathing, my heartbeat. Slow, heavy, sure. I liked the sound. It was the only thing that proved I was still there.

"You wanted warriors," I said quietly. "I am your last." A gust of wind blew through the hall, throwing up sparks, making the flames dance. I smiled. "Yes, I know. You're laughing. You didn't want warriors. You wanted stories. And now you have one."

I reached for the axe and placed it on my knees. I looked at the blade, dull but clean. I said, "I am your prayer. Not spoken, but answered. I am what happens when a person says yes to pain too often."

Outside, a raven cawed. Long, loud, clear. I raised my head. "I know, bird," I said. "I'm supposed to go on. I'm supposed to do something. But what's left to do when even the gods are tired?"

Silence. Only the crackling of the embers. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. The stone was cold, the smoke bitter. "Perhaps," I whispered, "all this was never a test. Perhaps it was punishment. And I'm only too proud to end it."

Then I laughed. Short, honest, tired. "But punishment or test—I don't care. I passed both."

I sat there until the fire was almost out. Just embers, just breath. I saw them, the shadows on the walls looking back at me, and I said, "You can't kill me. I've lost myself too many times."

And when the last spark died, I remained – alone, but awake.

Morning came hesitantly, as if afraid of being seen. A faint light filtered through the broken roof, pale, gray, but real. I opened my eyes, felt the cold creeping into my bones, and smiled. "Still there," I said. "Still there."

I sat up, my back aching, my legs heavy as stone. The smoke still hung in the air, sluggish, old. I rubbed my hands, reached for the axe lying beside me. Cold, familiar, patient. I liked the way it lay there, as if it knew the day was about to begin again.

Outside, I heard voices. Quiet, hesitant, but human. Footsteps in the snow, the clang of metal, the cracking of wood. I stood up, went to the gate, and stepped out.

The village was awake. Not loud, not alive—awake. Men carried beams, women swept away ashes, children searched the ruins for anything still standing. It smelled of smoke and earth, but underneath it lay something else. Hope, perhaps. Or defiance. Both smell the same.

The old man from the day before was standing in the square, talking to two boys who were barely older than children. I saw them nod, then they ran off to get wood. I went to him. He saw me, nodded. "You heard?" "What?" "They're building again." I looked around. Beams, smoke, life. "They should." "They're doing it because of you." I grinned. "No. They're doing it because they're afraid of doing nothing."

He laughed quietly, hoarsely. "And that's enough for you?" "It has to be."

I saw a woman drawing water with a child in her arms. Her eyes met mine. No anger, no fear. Just tiredness. I nodded. She nodded back. That was enough.

I walked through the village, slowly, my hands on the axe. Everyone saw me, no one spoke. That was a good thing. Words make things smaller. I wanted them to stay big.

I stopped at a half-burned wall. I placed my hand on the charred wood. It was rough, warm from the sun, old, but solid. I said quietly, "You're still holding on. So I'll hold on too."

The wind came in from the sea, salty and cold. I smelled it, saw the ravens circling above the rooftops. Three, maybe four. I grinned. "You're on time. You're in a hurry, aren't you?"

One landed on a post and looked at me. I stared back. "What now, bird? Should I go again? Or is this enough for you?" He croaked, short, sharp. Then he fell silent. "All right," I said. "Then I'll stay."

I looked at the sea. The light fell flat on the water, and for a moment it was beautiful. Not peaceful, not gentle—beautiful because it was real. I thought: Maybe that's the trick. To stop searching for what was, but to stand where it burns and say: Here. Me. Now.

The old man came back to me. "They want you to lead," he said. I shook my head. "I'm not a king." "But they think you are." I smiled wearily. "Then let them believe me. I won't take a crown. I'll take responsibility. That weighs less."

He nodded. "They'll listen to you." "No," I said. "They'll follow me. That's different."

I turned back to the sea, watched the light grow brighter, the water glitter. I thought: Maybe heaven has no judgment. Maybe it's just watching to see who stays when it gets cold.

I gripped the axe tighter and breathed deeply. The air tasted of salt and iron. I liked that. "Kattegat is alive," I said quietly. "And that's enough for today."

Then I moved on, among people, ashes, fire, and new beginnings. No one cheered, no one cried. But they worked. And that was more than most gods have ever accomplished.

Evening fell over Kattegat like a gentle weight. No storm, no thunder, just the slow, steady sinking of light that softened the world. I sat on a rock above the harbor, my axe beside me, my legs stretched out, my gaze on the sea. It was quiet. But not dead.

People had stopped talking. They worked until the sun went down. Smoke rose from new fires, children laughed somewhere in the background, and the wind carried the scent of life across the water. It was no celebration, no victory, no heroic song—just survival. And I'd always preferred survival to glory.

I looked down at the men carrying beams, the women hauling water. I thought: They don't know they call me king. They do it because it's easier than thinking. And that was okay. I didn't want a throne. I wanted movement. And they gave it to me.

I looked at my hands. Scars, calluses, traces of blood. All stories. All truth. I grinned quietly. "You look old, Ivar," I said to myself. "But you're still here."

I leaned back and let my head fall against the stone. The sky had cleared, almost blue, the first stars were blinking, as if they wanted to know if I was still awake. I raised my hand, giving them the middle finger. "I didn't need you," I said. "But thanks for watching."

Then I laughed. No longer a cold, broken laugh. An honest one. Calm, warm, small. I didn't know why. Maybe because for the first time, I didn't have to prove anything.

The ravens came, silent, like shadows. They perched on the posts by the harbor and looked at me. I nodded. "You've done well," I said. "You can rest now." They didn't croak. Not a sound. Just that brief, silent nod of nature, which says more than a thousand prayers.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. The wind was gentle, the sea smelled of iron and salt. I remembered my father, my mother, my brothers, and the wars. All the noise. And then this – this silence that no longer wants anything because it has seen everything.

I whispered, "Maybe this is peace. Not the end. Just quiet after too much noise."

I felt the cold on my skin, the stone on my back, the weight of years. But it felt good. Not easy, but right. I opened my eyes again, looked at the village, at the fire, which was now burning brightly again. Kattegat was alive. Different. Calmer. More mature.

I thought: Maybe this is life's last trick - to teach you that the war doesn't stop, but it gets quieter.

I looked back at the sea. No more smoke, no more blood. Only water, coming and going, tirelessly, honestly. I smiled, for the first time without pain.

"No one calls me a cripple," I said quietly. "But today... today you can call me human."

And when night finally came, the ravens remained silent.

The first laugh in death

I woke up early, before the sky brightened. The wind was different. Not a storm, not a winter breeze—it was that thin, cold breath that tells you something old is awakening. I sat up and listened. Nothing. Just the sea, calm, steady. But there was something beneath it. Something vibrating. I felt it in the ground, in my bones, in the air.

I stood up and stepped outside. The village was still asleep. Only smoke rose from two or three chimneys. The dogs were silent. Not a bird, not a footstep, not a sound. And that was precisely what made me nervous. Silence can scream louder than war.

I walked down the slope to the sea. The water was black, smooth, reflecting the sky that had yet to see light. I smelled salt, iron, something old and bitter. I bent down and dipped my hand in. Ice cold. Honestly. I held it there until it went numb. Then I pulled it out and saw the water dripping from my fingers—red.

I looked more closely. Not my blood. The sea was changing color. Dark, murky, almost black. I grinned. "There you are," I said quietly. "There you are again."

Something rustled behind me. I turned around, axe in hand. Only the wind. And yet – there was something. A sound, a quiet, deep laugh, barely audible, but there. No one laughed like that. No one laughs when the world is so quiet.

I walked slowly along the beach. The ravens were back, but they were flying high, circling, restless. One let out a sound that sounded almost like a warning cry. I laughed. "Too late, bird. I'm already inside."

The laughter came again. Closer this time. It didn't come from the village. Not from the sea. It came from everywhere. From the air, from the wood, from my own head. I stopped, closed my eyes, listened. It was deep, dry, old. Not mockery. Not madness. Just... knowledge.

I said quietly, "I know you." The laughter didn't respond. It simply stopped, as if it had never been there. Only the wind remained, flat, empty, indifferent. I grinned. "You've gotten worse, Death. You used to have style."

I continued walking, the beach ended, the path climbed again. I smelled smoke. Not from the village. Fresher, sharper. Another fire, further north. I stopped, listened. No crackling, no shout. Just that smell. I knew what it meant.

I looked over my shoulder back toward Kattegat. The village was still quiet, peaceful, small. I thought: This is going to be eaten again. It always eats everything. I took a deep breath, felt the smell of the fire settle in my gut. Then I laughed. Short, raw, genuine.

"All right," I said quietly. "If it starts again, at least there'll be music."

I went back to the village. The first people were awake, children were running between the huts, women were gathering wood. I saw them, but they didn't see me. Not yet. They didn't know that peace was already dead. I looked up at the sky. The ravens were circling, closer, lower. I nodded.

"I know," I said. "I hear it too."

And somewhere, between the sea and the wind, Death continued to laugh. Quietly. Patiently. Like someone who knows that his joke will win in the end.

I left before anyone in the village thought to ask where I was going. Questions bind. Answers lie. I wanted neither. The wind blew from the north, carrying the smell of smoke, fresh, alive. Smoke from things that were meant to burn—or were burning because someone wanted them to. I no longer knew the difference.

The land beyond Kattegat was silent. Snow on the meadows, frozen earth, trees like bones. I heard my footsteps, the crunch of the ice, my breathing. Nothing else. And then, somewhere in the distance, that laughter again. Brief, barely more than a whisper. I stopped.

"You're early," I said. Nothing answered. Only the wind. "I know you're here. I feel you at my back."

I continued walking. The smoke grew thicker. Dark, greasy, heavy. I smelled burnt flesh, metal, pitch. This wasn't an accident. This was work. War always reeks of intent.

When I reached the hill, I saw it. A small farmyard, burned down, nothing but beams, embers, a few remains that looked like people. I approached, slowly, step by step, the axe loosely in my hand. The snow was red. Not from the fire—from what came afterward.

A horse lay on the ground, half-charred, its teeth visible, its eye open. I looked around. Three bodies, maybe four. Men, peasants, not warriors. One was still

holding a sickle. I bent down, saw the wound. Not a cut, not a clean blow. Torn apart. As if by teeth.

I looked around, the fire hissed as a beam fell. I said quietly, "Not man-made." The laughter came again, quiet, as if from the earth itself. I turned, axe raised. Nothing. Just smoke, snow, wind. I felt my heart race. Not from fear. From memory.

I knew the feeling. It was like before a battle, when your body already knows what's coming, but your mind is still repressing it. I took a deep breath, smelled the blood, the soot, the iron again. I grinned. "Okay, old game. Show yourself."

A raven swooped down, landed on a post, and croaked loudly. I looked at it. "You saw it, didn't you?" It beat its wings, sharply, restlessly. I nodded. "Then you know what I know."

I stepped closer to the yard. Something lay beneath a beam. I lifted it with effort, my muscles aching, my back burning. Beneath it—a hand. Small. Delicate. Child. I paused briefly. "Damn."

I remained silent, heard the fire. And then, quite clearly, that laughter again. Longer this time. Like a breath that laughs because it knows you're about to answer. I felt it go through my skull, vibrating, trembling. I pressed my hand to my forehead.

"Stop it," I said quietly. But it continued to laugh. Not maliciously. Just... knowingly. I laughed along. Short, rough, crooked. "All right. If you're going to follow me, at least stay until I'm done."

I continued down the slope. Tracks in the snow. Deep imprints, too large for humans, too misshapen for animals. I knelt down and touched them. Warm. Not old. I grinned. "So you're real."

I stood up and looked into the forest. Dark, quiet, heavy. The smoke drifted in like a trail. I followed. Behind me the sea, before me death, above me ravens. And somewhere in between, my own laughter.

I didn't know which of us started. But one of us didn't stop.

The forest took me in as one takes in someone one already knows. No resistance, no welcome. Only darkness. Snow on branches, frozen air, a smell of wet wood and blood. I heard nothing but my breath—and the other one.

It was there. That deep, slow, barely audible breathing between the trees. I stopped. "I hear you," I said. No answer. Only the cracking of a twig, somewhere to my left. I turned. Nothing. The wind played with the snow, forming movements that weren't. I kept going.

The laughter came again. Closer this time, almost familiar. No mockery. No madness. It was as if someone was laughing who knew exactly what you were about to do. I stopped, felt my heart change rhythm. "Show yourself," I said calmly. Quiet.

Then I heard footsteps. Slow, deep, heavy. Something was approaching. No animal—no human—walks like that. Too carefully. Too quietly. I raised the axe and waited. A shadow dissolved between the trees. Broad, bent, but not slow. The skin was gray, the body large, restless, like an animal that has learned too much. I couldn't see the eyes, only the breath, steaming in the cold.

I took a step back, axe in hand. "What are you?" No answer. Just that breathing. I saw it tilt its head, almost human. Then it laughed. Deep, throaty, muffled. I felt it stab me in the back. I grinned. "So it's you. The joke of death."

It came closer. Now I saw more. The skin, covered in scars, the hands too large, the shoulders twisted as if someone had pulled too hard on the bones. I recognized it. Not as something new. As something old. As me.

I looked into its eyes. They were blue. Light blue. My color. Only emptier. Not a human, not a god, not an animal. A mirror. "Damn it," I whispered. It tilted its head, made a sound. Not a word, but almost. I understood it anyway. It said: *You made me.*

I gave a short, dry laugh. "They all say that."

I approached, slowly, the axe deep, but ready. "Are you made of flesh?" I asked. It didn't move. Only that quiet, rhythmic breathing. I stepped even closer. Now I could smell it—iron, earth, decay. I liked the smell. It was honest.

I raised the axe. "If you're me, then keep quiet." I struck.

No blood. No scream. Just a thud, dull, like someone hacking into wood. The thing swayed, but didn't fall. It laughed again, louder this time. I stepped back, axe in hand. "All right," I said. "Then stay where you are."

I hit again. And again. The laughter continued. No pain. No resistance. Just this deep, warm, almost sad laughter that filled my ears. I screamed, kept hitting until my arm was numb, the axe jammed, my breath burned.

Then it still stood there. Unharméd. Inhuman. Calm.

I fell to my knees, gasping. The thing stepped closer, bent down, looked me straight in the face. And then—it spoke.

"I am not your enemy." The voice was mine. Only older. Heavier. I stared. "Then what are you?" "I am what you left behind." I laughed softly, bloodily. "Then I should have buried you." "I was not made to die," it said. "I am made to remember."

I reached for the axe again, but my hands trembled. "I don't need a reminder." "Yes, I do," it said. "Without me, you're empty."

I slowly stood up and looked at it. The skin, the eyes, the smile—all me. Only without fear. Without pain. Only what remains when you give up on yourself.

I said, "If you're a memory, then laugh more quietly." It grinned. "I'm not laughing for you. I'm laughing because death has patience."

Then it retreated, slowly, disappearing among the trees. No more sound, no more shadows. Only wind.

I stopped, axe in hand, breathing heavily. I could still hear the laughter—not in the forest, not in the wind. But inside me. I said quietly, "Then we'll continue together."

And the snow fell again. Slowly. Like dust on a forgotten face.

I kept walking. Without a goal, without direction. The snow grew thicker, the wind stronger. Every tree looked the same as before, every trail disappeared as soon as I left it. I no longer knew how long I'd been walking. Maybe hours. Maybe days. Time has no bones here.

The laughter had become quieter, but not gone. It came in waves—sometimes close, sometimes far away, sometimes in my own breath. I heard it when I stood still. I heard it when I walked. I heard it even when I covered my ears.

"So this is what madness feels like," I said quietly. "Cold, but honest."

I came to a frozen stream. The water beneath it was black, almost invisible, only the ice shimmered dully in the gray light. I knelt down and looked into it. My face stared back—pale, scarred, eyes tired. I grinned. "You look worse than I thought."

Then, in the reflection of the ice, I saw him again. The shadow. Me. Only for a moment, but enough. He stood behind me, motionless, the same eyes, the same face, only breathless. I turned around. Nothing. Just snow. I laughed softly. "Coward."

I continued walking. The trees became thicker, darker. At some point, I could no longer hear the sea. Only wind. And voices. Many. Whispering, rustling, brittle. No language I knew. I understood them nonetheless. They said: *Stay. Stay.*

I stopped. "I'm tired of taking orders," I said. But my legs wouldn't obey me anymore. They wouldn't go any further. I forced them. Step by step. Every step was a fight. Against what, I didn't know. Against myself, probably. It was always me.

I came to a clearing. No snow here, no wind. Just ground, black, damp, warm. I felt it pulsing beneath my feet, as if the land were breathing. I smelled earth, blood, smoke. I liked the smell. It was old. It was real.

I looked around. Stones stood everywhere, tall, narrow, crooked. Runes on them, old, weathered. I didn't recognize any, but they looked like words that had remained silent for too long. I went to one and placed my hand on it. Warm. Too warm.

"What are you?" I whispered. The laughter came again, right behind me. I turned. Nothing. Just wind that didn't sound like wind. Then something whispered. "Home."

I closed my eyes. "Home?" "This is where you began," the voice said. "This is where you'll end." I laughed quietly. "I've ended so many times that I don't even know where to begin anymore."

I sat down on the ground and leaned against one of the stones. I felt the warmth creeping down my back, slowly, evenly. I thought: Maybe this isn't a place at all. Maybe this is me. Maybe this is all just my inner self, finally fed up with the outside world.

I heard footsteps. Again. Slow, heavy. I didn't look. I knew what was coming. I said, "If you laugh again, I won't hit you this time. I'm just listening."

And it did. The laughter came, deeper, quieter, almost human. I laughed along. We laughed together. The forest laughed with us.

And for a moment, it was beautiful. Not peaceful. Not gentle. Just real. Two echoes finally meeting.

I said quietly, "If you are me, then stay. I don't want to be alone anymore." But the wind took the words, carried them away, and tore them apart among the trees.

I stayed sitting, my head leaning against the stone. I thought of Kattegat, of the faces, of the sea. I thought of everything I wanted to be—king, god, curse—and laughed.

"In the end," I said, "we are all just shadows who have forgotten who they belong to."

The forest was silent. And I was silent with it.

I don't know when I fell asleep. Maybe I never did. Maybe sleep was just another name for what happens when you're finally too tired to fight back. The forest around me was silent. No wind, no animals, no sound. Only that faint humming that lingers in your ears when you're alone for too long.

I opened my eyes, and the sky was different. No longer gray, no longer day, no longer night. Only a light that came from nowhere and yet was everywhere. I looked around. The forest was there, but it was breathing. The trees moved, without wind. The ground pulsed beneath me as if it had a heart. I knew: This is not a dream. This is a memory that has forgotten that it is dead.

I heard the laughter again. Quiet, clearer this time. Not from the forest. Not from me. From somewhere in between. It was the laughter of a child. High, warm, honest. I knew it. I knew it too well.

"No," I said quietly. "Not you."

I turned, and there he was. A boy. Barefoot, in the snow, his hair fair, his eyes blue. My eyes. His gait was strange, crooked, like mine back then, before the pain became routine. He looked at me and grinned. "Hello, Ivar."

I felt my stomach clench. I wanted to say something, but no sound came out. He laughed again. "You look old." I nodded slowly. "And you look like hope that doesn't know any better yet."

He walked around me, curious, light, as if he were dancing. "You did it," he said. "What?" "Everything you wanted. Fear. Names. Fire. And? Is it good?" I grinned crookedly. "It keeps you warm, sometimes." "And when it doesn't warm you anymore?" "Then I drink."

He laughed again, that bright, clean laugh I'd forgotten at some point. "You've become funny." "Aging makes everyone funny. Otherwise, you can't stand it."

He stopped and looked at me. "Why did you come back?" I remained silent. He nodded, as if he already had the answer. "Because you can't help it, can you? You and your pain. You're an old married couple."

I looked away. "I'm not here to talk to ghosts." "But you're talking." "Because you're talking." "I'm you, Ivar." "No," I said quietly. "You're what was left of me before I learned to survive."

He stepped closer, looked me straight in the face. I saw my own childhood in his eyes—the anger, the laughter, the shame. "You forgot us," he said. "I had to." "And what did it achieve?" I grinned. "Everything. Nothing. Both."

He nodded. "Then stop running." I laughed. "If I stop running, I'll fall over." "Then fall." "No."

He smiled sadly. "You're afraid." "I'm never afraid." "Yes," he said calmly. "You're afraid that the pain will leave you. Because then you'll have nothing left."

I wanted to say something, but the lump in my throat was too big. I looked at him, and he turned pale. The light behind him grew stronger, the forest dissolved. I heard the laughter again—deeper this time, older, broader. Many voices, all from me. Father. Mother. Brothers. Myself.

"Ivar," said a voice, warm and close. "What?" "Come home." "Where?" "To us."

I looked into the light, which was growing brighter. White. Painful. I felt my body grow heavier, but my spirit lighter. I thought: If this is death, it has a sense of humor.

Then, quite suddenly, everything stopped. No laughter. No light. Only darkness. And one last sentence remained:

Death doesn't laugh at you. He laughs with you.

I opened my eyes. The forest was silent again. I lay in the snow, the axe beside me, cold, heavy, real. I breathed. Slowly. Surely. I laughed quietly. "So this is what life feels like when you lose it for a moment."

Then I stood up, looked up at the gray sky, and whispered, "Not yet, Father. Not yet."

I left the forest as the morning grew grayer. No snow fell, no birds sang. Only this long, flat wind that smelled as if it had seen things it didn't want to tell. The sky was heavy, the light dull. I felt every step, but I didn't know if I was still really walking or just imitating the movement.

The ravens were waiting. Five of them this time. They sat on the bare branches, watching me as if they knew I'd made it—whatever "made it" meant. I nodded at them. "You're right. I'm still here. Unfortunately for me."

I followed the path that led back to Kattegat. The snow was packed hard, like marble over ancient graves. I smelled salt, fire, life. And somewhere in between, the echo of my own breath. The forest lay behind me, but I carried it with me—on my back, in my skin, in my thoughts.

I remembered the boy, the voice, the laughter. I remembered the light calling me. I remembered my own fear, which felt like an old friend ignored for too long. I laughed softly. "I heard you, little bastard. But dying can wait."

When I reached the top of the hill, I saw Kattegat. Smoke, fire, movement. Life. Not much, but enough. Men carrying beams, women hanging laundry, children running through mud. It was small, dirty, loud. I liked the sound. It sounded worldly.

A boy saw me first. Maybe ten, maybe younger. He stopped, the wood in his arms, his eyes wide. Then he shouted, "He's back!" And everyone turned around. I saw faces. Old, young, suspicious, tired. Some whispered my name. Others looked at me as if a ghost stood before them. I grinned. "Maybe both."

The old man stepped forward. "You were gone." "Yes." "Where to?" I looked toward the forest. "Inward." He nodded slowly. "And?" "I found myself. I didn't like it."

He laughed quietly and scratched his beard. "And now?" "Now I'm helping build."

I walked past him, into the crowd. They stepped back, making room, but not out of fear. Out of respect. A different kind of respect. The kind you give someone who has seen things you're better off not seeing. I liked that look. It was honest.

I picked up a piece of wood, stood it upright, and began to lift a beam. My muscles ached, my back burned. I sweated. It felt good. "Kings don't work," said a voice behind me. I looked around and grinned. "Then I never was one."

The sun briefly broke through the clouds, just a hint, but enough. I blinked, paused briefly. A shadow flew over me—a raven, large, calm, slow. It circled over Kattegat, then disappeared toward the sea. I watched it, smiling.

"Death has a sense of humor," I said quietly. "He lets you come home so you have something to lose again."

Later, I sat by the fire burning in the middle of the village. People were talking, laughing quietly, sharing bread. Someone brought me a bowl of mead. I took it and drank. Warm, strong, sweet. I wiped my mouth, looked into the flames. The flames trembled, danced, flickered like memory. I thought: Perhaps this is the true laughter of death—the one that imitates life.

I placed the axe next to me and looked into the faces. A child laughed. Bright, clean, like before. I looked over and smiled back. "Be careful," I whispered. "The laughter will find you."

Then I looked again into the fire, into the red, pulsating heart of the world, and said, "I'm back. And this time I'll stay until the fire stops laughing."

The night was clear. The sea was calm. The flames in the village danced softly, as if they knew someone was watching over them. I sat on the roof of the hall, my back against the chimney, the axe beside me. Below me, Kattegat slept—breathing, dreaming, living. I smiled. Not out of pride. Out of tiredness.

I looked up at the sky. No moon, no clouds, only stars. Lots of them. Cold and vast. I thought: They see everything, but they understand nothing. Like the gods. Perhaps stars were simply the eyes of those too cowardly to be born again.

I drank the rest of the mead from my skin. Lukewarm, bitter, good. The taste of earth and life. I wiped my mouth and looked out to sea. The water was black, still, honest. It reflected the light from the fires in the village, as if it were trying to remind itself what warmth looks like.

I heard the laughter again. Very faint, barely there. Like an echo of something that wanted to go long ago. I said quietly, "I hear you, old man. You tried. You almost had me." No answer. Just the sea.

I grinned. "You know what's funny, Tod? I didn't hold it against you. You're just doing your job. So am I."

The wind blew across the rooftops, playing with ash, smoke, and flames. I heard the faint crackling of the wood, the breathing of the world. That was life. So simple. So brutal. So real.

I thought of the boy in the forest, his voice, his eyes. I thought of the sentence I wanted to forget: *Death doesn't laugh at you. He laughs with you.* I nodded. "And today, my friend, I laughed back."

I stood up, slowly, heavily, but surely. I walked to the edge of the roof and looked down at Kattegat. Small fires, sleeping bodies, a village that dared to dream again. I felt the cold creeping into my bones. I let it.

"You have no kings," I whispered. "But you have me. And I'm not afraid anymore."

A raven flew over me, silently, black against black. It landed on a post at the edge of the village and looked at me. I raised the axe. "Give him my regards," I said. "Tell him I need a few more days."

The bird nodded. I swear, it nodded. Then it flew away, toward the sea, until it disappeared into the darkness.

I sat back down and watched the light slowly fade. Kattegat was asleep. I stayed awake. Someone has to.

And for the first time in many years, the laughter was gone. No echo. No shadow. No call.

Only silence. Pure, deep, honest silence.

I leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and whispered, "Rest, Death. I'm awake for both of us."

And the wind answered with nothing. And that was enough.

The King of Pain

The sun rose slowly, gray and sluggish, like an old woman dragging herself out of bed. I sat in the hall, on a chair that might once have been a throne, if anyone had bothered to call it that. It was just a piece of wood, raw, rough, crooked. I liked it that way. Smooth, polished things lie.

The fire in the center burned quietly. People came and went, bringing wood, food, words. I spoke little. Words are expensive when you've wasted too many. One of the men—young, with a face that still believed in gods—stepped forward. "Ivar," he said. "They call you king." I nodded. "They always do when they lack the courage to lead themselves."

He was silent, then: "And you? Will you take the name?" I grinned. "I'll take anything that doesn't eat me."

He laughed uncertainly. "And if it does eat you?" "Then I'll chew back."

He nodded and left. I stayed. I liked the sound of footsteps on the wood. It sounded like movement. Movement means life. Stillness means stone.

I thought of the word *king*. It tasted of iron, blood, and guilt. I had never asked for it, but I had never refused it. Perhaps that was the secret: those who survive long enough will eventually be forced to stand above others, simply because they aren't dead yet.

I stood up, went to the fire, and looked into the embers. There it was again—the light that lives because it burns. I whispered, "I don't want a crown. I want control."

Outside, I heard voices. Men arguing. Wood falling. Children screaming. Life. I stepped outside. The wind came from the sea, smelling of salt, sweat, and smoke. I breathed deeply, feeling the cold cleansing my lungs.

The old man—the one who was still looking at me as if he knew how it would end—stood at the edge of the square. He nodded at me. "They're following

you," he said. "Because they have to." "No," he said calmly. "Because they want to." I laughed. "Wanting is just another word for fear."

He stepped closer. "And you? Don't have any more?" I grinned. "I learned to feed her before she eats me."

He nodded. "Then you are king enough."

I looked out to sea. Ravens circled above the waves, black against the light. I thought: They never stop. Neither they nor I. I said quietly, "If this is power, then it's a bad joke."

The wind blew, the fire hissed, a pot fell somewhere. I liked the sounds. They were real. No cheering, no singing, no glorification. Just everyday life.

I walked slowly through the village. Men greeted, children ran, women looked. I looked into their faces—some grateful, some watchful, some blank. I thought: This is my kingdom. No gold, no feasts. Only what remains when you survive too many times.

I sat in the hall, the fire crackling, the axe beside me, staring into the embers as if they were telling me what to do. But fire doesn't give answers; it only shows how everything ends if you wait long enough.

Outside, the village grew louder. Men argued, children screamed, wood fell. It was a sound that smelled of work. I got up and went outside. The wind was cold, smelling of salt and metal. I liked the smell. It reminded me that I was alive.

People saw me, some nodded, some looked away. I sensed it: They called me king, but they didn't want a king. They wanted someone who would be there when things got hot, someone who would step forward when things got dangerous, someone who would remain silent when they needed to speak. That wasn't a throne. That was an anvil.

I walked across the square. The old man, who always knew too much, came toward me. "You look tired," he said. I grinned. "That's my new face." "Power costs money," he said. "Everything costs money."

He walked with me, slowly. "They want you to decide." "What?" "Whether we attack before they attack us." "Who?" He nodded north. "Those who burned the farm. They're coming."

I stopped. "How many?" "Enough to make the night restless."

I looked out to sea, where the ravens were circling. "Then peace is over." "Was it ever there?" I grinned. "He tried."

We continued through the village. Women carried water, men sharpened axes, children watched. Everywhere, that smell of anticipation hung in the air, like before a thunderstorm. I knew it. It tasted of iron and sweat.

"If you are king," said the old man, "you must decide." "I am not a king." "Then decide anyway."

I looked into his eyes. They were gray, hard, tired. "I'll decide if I have to." "You have to now."

I took a deep breath and looked at my hands. Scars, calluses, blood. All stories. I thought of the boy in the forest, of the laughter, of the voice. I thought of Kattegat, which must not burn again. I thought of myself, who knew nothing but fighting.

"Good," I said quietly. "Then we fight."

The old man nodded. No cheer, no smile. Just the brief, honest nod of a man who knows what war is.

I looked up at the sky. The ravens were circling, closer, lower. I said quietly, "Then come here. I'm not finished yet."

I went back into the hall and sat down, the axe on my knees. I stared into the flames. They danced as if they knew. I whispered, "King of Pain. Glad you found me."

The hall was empty when I left. Outside, the sky hung low, gray like old iron. I walked slowly across the square, looking at the faces. Men, women, children – they were no longer talking. They were working. That was better. Talking brings hope, work brings results.

I stopped and saw one of the men sharpening axes. The sound was calm, steady, almost beautiful. I liked it. It sounded like preparation. Like that quiet breath before everything breaks loose. I asked, "How many weapons do we have?" He looked up. "Enough for everyone who can fight." "And those who can't?" "They pray." I grinned. "Then we have a problem."

I moved on. Two women were sorting arrows, tying new points. An old blacksmith struck sparks from cold steel. Children carried wood, some crying, some laughing. I thought: This isn't an army. This is what's left when you have no choice.

I stopped in front of the smithy. "How many more swords can you make?" I asked. "As many as the day has," said the blacksmith. "Then make it longer."

He nodded without saying a word. I liked that. Men who act instead of talk are worth their weight in gold.

The old man came back to me, his stick firmly in his hand. "They're following you." "I know." "But you also know they're going to die." "Of course." "And you?" I grinned. "I die a little every day. I've had practice."

He nodded slowly. "Kings should live." "Then I'm not a king."

We stood silently next to each other as the wind drove the fire. I watched the people—how they ran, lifted, built. No one asked why. No one complained. They just did it. And that was power. No crown, no throne, no title. Just people following you because they believe you won't tremble when they do it.

I looked at my hands. They weren't shaking. Not anymore.

"When they come," I said, "they'll expect us to be afraid." The old man nodded. "And you?" "I'll give them something else." "What?" "Hungry."

He laughed softly. "The King of Pain has an appetite." "Always," I said. "But I don't like to share."

I walked to the edge of the village, where the sea began. The ravens flew low, almost over my head. I raised the axe in greeting. "You were never far away," I said. "Good. I need witnesses."

The wind blew sharper, the water rumbled gently. I felt it—the crackling, the coming, the inevitability. I thought: Maybe what I am is not a human, not a god, not a king. Maybe I'm just the space in between—the thing that happens when life and death briefly forget each other.

I turned around and looked at the village. Kattegat wasn't burning. Not yet. I smiled. "I'll give you one more day. Then we'll see who's laughing."

Then I went back, step by step, with the axe in my hand and the certainty that pain is the one thing that never betrays itself.

The fire burned flatly, wearily, as if even the flames were afraid of what would follow. I sat before it, the axe beside me, my head heavy, my thoughts loud. Silence filled the village. No songs, no prayers, no courage. Only that silence that arises when everyone knows they're still there—but perhaps not for much longer.

I stared into the embers. They contracted, expanded, and breathed. I liked that. It reminded me that even things that burn still have rhythm. I took a small stick and threw it into the fire. It hissed, cracked, and fell apart. It's that simple, I thought. This is what dying looks like, if you're honest.

A board creaked behind me. Footsteps. The old man came, slowly, cautiously, like someone who knows that words are harder to speak in the dark. "You're not asleep," he said. "I don't want to miss it." "What?" "The moment when your courage fails."

He sat down next to me, staring into the flames. "You talk like you're old." I grinned. "I'm older than I look." "And more tired than you let on." "That's my secret."

We were silent for a while. Only the fire spoke, and even that quietly. Then he said, "They need you tomorrow." "I know." "And you?" "I need what comes tomorrow."

He nodded. "War?" "Movement."

He fell silent again, looked at his hands. They trembled slightly. "I've seen many kings," he said quietly. "Some wanted fame, others peace. You want none of that." "Because both are lies." "And what's left then?" "Pain. It doesn't lie."

He laughed, short, dry, honest. "Then you're king enough." "That's what they all say before they die."

He looked at me. "Are you afraid of it?" "Dying?" "Yes." I grinned. "Only if it's pointless. I don't mind endings. I mind fading away."

The old man nodded, slowly, understandingly. Then he stood up and patted me on the shoulder. "Then make sure they remember." "That's what I live for."

He left. I stayed. I heard the waves, the crackling of the fire, the wind rustling through the wood. I thought of Ragnar, of Aslaug, of all the voices that told me what I should be: Warrior. King. Cursed. I thought: Maybe I'm just a man who learned to breathe louder than his fear.

I lay back and looked up at the sky. Stars, still, cold. "You were never for us," I whispered. "You are only witnesses."

Then I closed my eyes, the axe firmly in my hand. I felt the warmth of the fire, the trembling in my bones, the coming of morning. I whispered, "Come on, Death. I've missed you."

And the wind answered with a quiet, honest silence.

I woke up before sunrise. The air was heavy, damp, metallic. I smelled blood, even though none had been shed yet. The wind was coming from the north, cold, biting, real. I sat up, reached for the axe. It lay there like an old dog—faithful, tired, ready.

I stood up and went outside. The village was awake. Men were tying straps, sharpening blades, testing shields. Women held children, some praying quietly. I walked through them, and they stepped aside, as if I were already more spirit than human. Perhaps I was.

The old man came toward me. "They're here," he said. "How many?" "More than us." I grinned. "Then it's a fair fight."

We climbed the slope where the plain was visible. Fog lay over the ground, thick, heavy, like a curtain that hadn't yet fallen. But I saw them. Shadows. Movement. Ships in the haze. They were coming. Slowly, orderly, hungry.

I stood there, looking at her, axe in hand, cold in my bones. I thought: So this is the price of peace. A new battle. A new memory. A new name no one needs.

"What should we do?" asked the old man. "Wait," I said. "For what?" "For the moment they think we're afraid."

He looked at me, understood. I looked at the village. Men at the walls, bows drawn, eyes still. No panic. No anger. Just this calm knowledge that it makes no difference whether you run or stay—death will find you anyway.

I went forward, onto the wall, and looked into the white nothingness. The fog moved, slowly, alive. I felt it on my skin. It tasted of iron. I raised the axe. "Let them come," I said quietly. "They shall see how a king of pain laughs."

The wind grew stronger. The fog ripped. And then I saw them. Shields. Men. Banners. Black. Red. Unknown. Their faces weren't faces, just shadows beneath helmets. They strode forward, calmly, confidently.

I grinned. "Brave bastards."

The first arrows flew. A dull thud, wood, a scream. Then another. I ducked, feeling the air cut. I raised the axe, looked down. The ground vibrated as if it were breathing with me.

"Now," I said.

The men charged forward. No horn, no shout. Just footsteps, heavy, determined. The clash of shields, the clang of iron. I went with them, slowly, calmly. I liked the sound. It was music.

The first enemy approached me, tall, young, and clean. I saw his eyes—blue, like mine. I thought: Beautiful. Then I struck. One blow, clean, short, honest. No hatred, no triumph. Just necessity.

I looked around. Movement everywhere. Fire, smoke, blood. I laughed. Loudly, rawly, genuinely. "There you are again!" I shouted into the noise.

Death answered with nothing. Only with work.

I kept fighting. Step by step. Blow by blow. No more thinking, no more wanting. Just doing. That's the secret. When you stop thinking about it, it becomes easy. Almost beautiful.

I didn't fall. I stood. And as the fog lifted, I saw the sea, tinged red, and the ravens returned. Slowly, silently.

I smiled. "You're on time."

Then I moved on. A man in the storm, a king without a throne, who only fought so that laughter wouldn't forget how to breathe.

The fog was gone, the light brutal. The sun shone as if it wanted to expose every lie. I stood in the middle of it, in the chaos. The ground was soft, wet,

warm with blood. Men screamed, iron sang, wood splintered. I smelled everything—sweat, smoke, death. It was like coming home.

I saw the next one coming, young, strong, too fast for his courage. I waited until he was close enough, then stepped aside and struck. The axe struck. No heroic cry, no pride. Just that dull sound of bones breaking. I dropped him and kept kicking.

Another ran toward me, shouting something about gods. I laughed before striking. "They can't hear you," I said. Then he was silent.

I didn't fight to win. I fought to stay. Every blow was a memory, every cut proof that I was still here. I didn't count how many fell. Numbers belong in books, not in wars.

The blood made the floor slippery. I slipped, caught myself, felt the pull in my back. I laughed briefly, painfully. "You're getting old, Ivar." Someone came from the side, I ducked, the blow went over me. I turned, struck upward, and hit the neck. Warm blood on my cheek. I tasted iron. I liked the taste. It was honest.

I looked up briefly and saw the sea—waves crashing against ships. Fire, smoke, screams. The sky had turned black. I thought: If these are the gods, at least they're consistent.

A spear hit the ground next to me, close to my hand. I grabbed it, pulled it out, and threw it back. A scream. Then silence. I grinned. "Thanks for the loan."

I fought on, step by step. No plan, no goal. Just movement. I felt nothing anymore—no cold, no fear. Only my body, doing what it could. Survive.

At some point, it became quieter. Not calm, just quieter. The clanging further away, the breathing closer. I stopped, axe in hand, my knees heavy. Bodies lay around me. Friends, enemies, all the same. Death doesn't discriminate.

I saw one of my men fall, saw another catch him, scream, then continue fighting. I thought: This is true faith. Not in gods. In movement.

Someone called my name. I turned around. An enemy came toward me, taller than the others, with a double-headed axe. I waited. He raised it, shouted, and slashed. I dodged, just barely, feeling the wind rush past my ear. I stepped closer and rammed the axe into his stomach. He gasped, fell, and looked at me. There was nothing in his eyes. Just that empty astonishment everyone has when they realize it's over.

I pulled out the axe and wiped it on the snow. The snow was red. I looked up at the sky. Ravens. Always ravens. I nodded. "I know. I know."

Then I sat down on a dead tree trunk, breathing heavily. The fight continued, but without me. I needed a break. I looked at my hands. Trembling. Covered in blood. Real. I thought: This is what power looks like. This is what it feels like. Warm, wet, tired.

A boy came running up, barely sixteen, his sword too big, his heart too fast. "Ivar! We'll hold them back!" I grinned. "Good. Hold them until they realize they're already dead." He nodded and started running again. I watched him go. He was me, only dumber, more alive, unbroken. I envied him for exactly three seconds. Then I forgot about him again.

The wind shifted. The sea raged louder. I knew what that meant. The next wave was coming. I stood up and grabbed the axe. "Come on," I said. "I want to see if you laugh louder this time."

And when they came out of the fog, again, perhaps hundreds of them, I raised the axe, breathed deeply, and didn't scream. I laughed.

Not out of anger. Out of truth.

Because I finally understood: Pain was never my enemy. It was my throne.

The wind had died down. Only smoke remained. Heavy, black, thick as pitch. I stood in the middle of it, axe in hand, blood on my skin. It was silent. No more screams, no more clanging. Only the breathing of the survivors, that shallow, disbelieving gasp when the body hasn't yet grasped that it's made it.

I looked around. Bodies everywhere. Men, women, friends, enemies—all one. The snow was gone, melted by the blood that still steamed. It smelled of iron, of earth, of memory. I knew the smell. It was old. It was honest.

I walked slowly, step by step. My legs felt like wood, my back like stone. I saw faces I recognized. Some with open eyes, some with half-open mouths, as if they wanted to say something else. I stopped at one—the boy from before. He lay there, the blade still in his hand, his face young, almost peaceful. I crouched down and placed the axe on his chest. "Well done," I said quietly.

The old man came toward me, limping, his stick clutched tightly in his hand. His face was gray from the smoke, his eyes empty but alive. "It's over," he said. I

looked at him. "Nothing is ever over." He nodded slowly. "But they're gone." "Until the next ones come."

He was silent, then: "You saved them." I grinned wearily. "I just didn't let them all die. That's different."

We stood there in silence, among the dead, while the wind blew the smoke toward the sea. I looked up at the sky. The ravens were coming back. Of course they were coming back. Always when death had had its fill. They circled, silently, dignified. I raised the axe as if in salute. "You are worse than I," I said.

One of them let out a short, sharp sound. I laughed. "Yes, yes, I know. The king is alive."

I walked slowly through the destroyed gate back into the village. The huts were still standing, half-built. Fires were burning, wood was glowing. Women rushed to the wounded, children searched for fathers, brothers, anyone. I walked through, no one spoke to me. They saw me, and that was enough. I was no hero. I was proof that even pain can survive.

I sat down on the stone at the edge of the square and placed the axe beside me. My hands trembled, my bones burned. I breathed heavily, looked at the blood clinging to me. I thought: If this is power, then it's expensive.

The old man came back. "They're asking what they should do now." I looked at him. "Live." "And you?" I grinned weakly. "I'm the king of pain. I'll do what I always do—I'll stay."

He nodded and sat down next to me. We watched the sun rise. Slowly, pale, cautiously. It fell on Kattegat, on the blood, the wood, the faces. It was beautiful. Ugly, but beautiful.

I whispered, "That's all that remains. Stand still. Breathe. Keep going." The old man nodded. "That's enough." "Sometimes."

I looked at the ravens again. They flew away, toward the sea, toward the light. I knew they would come back. They always came back.

I smiled. Not triumph. Not peace. Just that small, honest smile of a man who understood that pain is not a curse—but proof.

I grabbed the axe, put it over my shoulders, and said quietly, "The king is still standing." Then I walked. Slowly. Heavy. But upright.

A throne of scars

I awoke to silence. No scream, no blow, no fire. Just stillness. That dangerous, all-too-honest silence that comes after everything you've survived. I sat up, my back burning, my joints aching, but I was there. Still there.

The light slanted through the cracks in the hall. Dust danced in the air. The floor smelled of blood and smoke, the smell of survival. I liked it. It was real.

I stood up and walked slowly out. Kattegat lay before me like an animal, beaten but not dead. Smoke rose from the huts, men mended roofs, women washed the dirt from wounds, children collected arrows. It was quiet, but lively. I took a deep breath. "Very well," I said quietly. "Then onward."

The old man was waiting at the edge of the square. He looked at me and nodded. "They're waiting." "For what?" "For you to speak." I grinned. "I don't speak well." "They're still listening."

I walked through the crowd. Faces, all marked, scarred, dusty. Some had tears, some just emptiness. I stopped, in the middle of the village. No stage, no platform. Just earth. That's how you talk to people who've seen too much.

"You're alive," I said. No one answered. "That's enough."

A few nodded. One called out, "What now?" I looked at him. "Now you heal." "And you?" I grinned. "I'll stay until you can."

A murmur went through the crowd. No cheers, no applause. Just movement. They knew it was going on, and that was enough. I turned around and walked back into the hall. The old man followed me.

"They call you king," he said. "I know." "And you?" "I call myself busy."

He gave a short, hoarse laugh. "That's almost the same thing." "No," I said. "A king wants to rule. I want them to breathe."

I sat back down on my chair. It was now more of a throne than a chair, but not because it was more beautiful—because everything else was broken. I placed the axe next to me and looked into the embers of the fire.

I thought of the dead. Of the boy who was born too soon, of the men who never knew why they were fighting. I thought of myself. I felt every scar, every

wound, every cut. And I knew: This was my throne. No gold. No glory. Just skin that had learned to grow again.

The old man stepped closer. "You look tired." I grinned. "I finally look real." "What will you do?" "Breathe. And see if the world allows it."

He nodded and turned to leave. "They'll need you." "Then let them come if they need to. I'm here."

I remained alone in the hall. The fire hissed, the wind played with the ashes. I placed a hand on my chest. My heartbeat was steady. Heavy. Real.

I whispered, "A throne of scars. Beautiful image." Then I laughed. Short, hoarse, honest. "Suits me."

I walked slowly through Kattegat. No destination. Just footsteps. The snow had melted, remaining as gray mud between the huts. It smelled of wood, blood, and soup. An honest smell. The smell of those who no longer hope for victory, but for survival.

People worked quietly. Women washed fabrics, mended clothes, and carried water. Men built new walls and removed rubble. Not a word was spoken in vain. Words were precious after a battle. Every sentence sounded as if it could be the last.

I stopped in front of an old man erecting a beam. He was trembling slightly, his hands bloody, but he kept going. "Let me," I said. He shook his head. "If I stop, I'll fall over." I nodded. "Then I'll stay standing until you do it." He smiled, a short, tired smile. "That's the first time a king has listened to me." I grinned. "Then I guess I'm not a real king."

I continued walking. A child was sitting on a step, its legs wrapped up, its face dirty. I stopped and looked at it. "What's wrong?" "Nothing," it said. "Just cold." I took off my coat and threw it to it. "Not anymore." It looked at me, its eyes wide, blue, clear. "Thank you." I nodded. "Keep it. I've got enough fire in my belly."

I walked on. A woman was weeping quietly, her hands in her lap, a piece of fabric between her fingers. I recognized the pattern. A shirt. Not a child's toy, not a piece of jewelry. A shirt belonging to someone who was no longer with us. I said nothing. I sat down next to her, placed my hand on the ground. We both looked at the fire in front of us. No comfort, not a word. Only warmth.

She finally said, "Why you?" I looked at her. "Because no one else was left." "That's not a reason." "Yes, it is," I said. "The only one that matters."

I stood up again and continued walking. Every step felt heavy, but right. I saw the faces, the mouths, the hands. All scars. Some fresh, some old. I thought: This is my kingdom. No stone, no gold. Just skin trying to grow back.

A boy came toward me, barely older than fourteen, a sword on his back, his face too serious. "Ivar," he said, "when do we attack again?" I looked at him. "Why?" "Because they deserve it." "Because you want to live or because you want to kill?" He was silent. I placed a hand on his shoulder. "When you fight, fight to stay, not to burn. Burning is easy. Staying is hard." He nodded, half-understanding, but that was enough.

I walked to the harbor. The sea was calm, the water dark. I saw the burned remains of a boat. I thought of those who had sailed out and never returned. I thought of all the times I wanted to leave, too, but stayed. I thought: Maybe that's what being king is—not leaving when you could.

I sat down on the quay, letting my legs dangle over the water. The wind blew from the north, cold but clean. I liked it. It smelled of truth. I saw my hands—bruised, scarred, raw. I rubbed them together, laughing softly. "A throne of scars," I said. "And no one notices it's comfortable once you get used to it."

Someone called my name behind me. I didn't turn around. I wanted to hold on to the moment. This quiet, dirty peace. The one no one sings about.

I looked into the gray distance and thought: Maybe this is all that remains—sitting, breathing, waiting, smiling. And bearing the wounds until they soften.

The night was soft. No storm, no fighting, no wind. Only the crackling of the fire and the breathing of the village. I sat outside, alone, in front of the hall. The flames cast long shadows across the ground, and the smoke drifted in calm lines into the sky, as if it too wanted to escape.

I drank mead from a wooden cup, lukewarm, sweet, a bit stale. I liked the taste. It reminded me of things that weren't quite bad, but weren't fresh either. Like life after a war.

I looked into the embers. They glowed calmly, almost alive. I thought: Fire is like pain—it doesn't want to destroy you, it just wants to be seen. If you ignore it, it consumes you. If you look at it, it warms you.

I leaned back, looked up at the sky. Stars, clear, indifferent. I thought of Ragnar. Of Aslaug. Of all the voices that had shaped me. They wanted a god. A warrior. A king. I was all of these things, but never enough of anything. I laughed softly. "I'm sorry, Mother. I only became a man."

I took another sip and dropped the cup. The dull clatter on wood sounded like one breath too many. I thought of those who were crying today, and of those who could no longer. I thought of my men, their faces, their hands, their fear. I thought of myself, telling them to hold on—and knew I could hardly do it myself.

I saw my hands in the firelight. Rough, torn, smeared with blood, not all of it mine. I placed them on my knees, turned them over, examined the lines, the calluses, the small cracks. Every scar a sentence, every wrinkle a memory. I grinned. "Beautiful language, Ivar. Too bad no one can read it."

I heard footsteps. The old man came, quietly, cautiously, like someone who knows that words have a different effect in the middle of the night. He sat down next to me without saying anything. We both looked into the fire.

After a while, he said, "You look calmer." "I'm not." "But you're breathing differently." I nodded. "Maybe because for the first time I know there's no point—and that's okay."

He smiled. "You talk like you've found peace." "Peace is overrated. I've found acceptance. That's enough."

He nodded. "You've changed." "I've stopped trying to prove myself. I'm not a curse, not a miracle. Just a body that knows too much."

He briefly placed a hand on my shoulder. Heavily, honestly. "That's more than most people will." Then he stood up and left. I watched him until the darkness swallowed him.

I stayed. I thought: Maybe that's the purpose of pain—to keep you alive when everything else stops. Maybe scars aren't memories, but ways to find your way back when you're lost.

I placed my hand on my chest, feeling the blow. Calm. Slow. Strong. "All right," I whispered. "Then I'll stay a little longer."

The wind came from the sea, cool and gentle. I smiled. "Pain doesn't lie," I said quietly. "That's why he's mine."

And the fire answered with a small, honest crackle.

I woke up as the sun ate its way through the smoke. The light was soft, golden, almost too beautiful for this place. I was still sitting in the hall, on the chair that should have once been a throne. My bones ached, my skin burned, but I felt awake. Clear. Like someone who sees everything for the first time, without fear.

I got up and went outside. The air was fresh, quiet, clean. No shouting, no hurry. Just the quiet hammering of wood, the crackling of a fire, the boiling of water. Kattegat was alive. Tired, but real. I liked the sound. It was the opposite of war.

I walked across the square. People didn't greet me, they just nodded. That was better. More honest. I didn't need cheering. Cheering is for those who need it. I had enough blood.

I stopped by a group of men building a new fence. "Will it hold?" I asked. One grinned. "Until the next storm comes." I nodded. "Then it'll be strong enough." They laughed briefly, genuinely and harshly. I moved on.

Children ran barefoot through the mud, chasing each other, laughing. I stopped and watched them. The laughter sounded strange in this landscape. Foreign, but beautiful. A sign that something else is growing. A little boy ran by, stopped, and looked up at me. "Are you the king?" I grinned. "If it helps, yes." "You don't look like one." I laughed. "That's the best thing anyone can tell me."

He nodded contentedly and continued walking. I stopped and watched him go. I thought: Maybe that's what being king is all about—that children aren't afraid of you.

I continued walking, to the harbor. The sea was calm, clear, almost still. A few men were mending nets, others were unearthing new boats. I looked at them, my hands rough, my face empty, but not hopeless. I said nothing. I didn't need to say anything.

The old man came again, quietly, as always. "You're up early." "I was never a good sleeper." "People are back at work." "I know." "Because you showed them." I laughed. "I didn't show them anything. I just didn't stop when it hurt."

He nodded. "That's enough sometimes." I looked out at the sea. "You know what's weird?" "What?" "I wanted all of this. Power. Names. Fear. And now

that I have it, I just want them to leave me alone." "That's the price." "For what?" "For survival."

We stood there, side by side, watching the waves. I thought: Maybe that's all you get from life—the choice of what you endure pain for. And if you're wise, you endure it for others.

I turned around and looked at the village. It wasn't beautiful, intact, or strong. But it stood. And that was enough.

I walked back slowly, step by step, and every face that looked back at me was part of my throne. Not made of gold, not of glory. Made of scars. And each one told the same story: We're still here.

I sat back down on the chair in the hall, placed the axe beside me, and stared into the embers. I said quietly: "A king made of pain. A throne made of scars. And no one wants to take it away from me. Finally, something that lasts."

Then I closed my eyes briefly. Just for one breath. And the silence felt like peace.

The day was bright, clear, almost too still. I sat outside the hall, the sun on my face, my back against the wall. The wood was warm, the fire inside crackled softly. I drank water from a cup, no mead, no blood. Just water. It tasted strangely clean. Almost alien.

A few children were playing in the square, laughing, shouting, throwing stones into the fire. I watched them. They knew nothing about fame, about power, about what it costs to be a king. They were just there. It was more than I had ever managed.

A woman approached me, carrying a basket full of herbs. Her face was hard but calm. "The wounded are asking for you," she said. "I'm not a healer." "But you survived." I nodded. "That's different." "Not for them."

I stood up and followed her to the hut at the edge of the village. Inside, it smelled of smoke and ointment. Men lay on furs, weak, battered, but alive. I stopped at the door. One raised his head. "Ivar," he said quietly. "Is that you?" I nodded. "We heard you were dead." I grinned. "Not today."

Another laughed weakly. "If you live, we live too." I looked at him. "No. You live because you deserve it. I only live because I can't stop."

They laughed, quietly, honestly, like men who know they need to laugh to keep themselves from breaking down. I sat between them, spoke little, and listened. Stories about brothers, about women, about dreams no one dreams anymore. I thought: This is being a king. Not giving orders. Listening.

A man with a bandage over his eye said, "Why are you still fighting?" I looked at him. "Because I can't do anything else." "And if you learn?" I grinned. "Then I won't be king anymore."

He laughed. "Then you'd be free." "Maybe."

I stayed for a while until they fell asleep. Then I got up and stepped outside. The wind was gentle, the sea calm. I went to the shore and sat down on a rock. I heard the sound of the waves, the distant call of the ravens. They were never far away.

I thought of all the times I wanted blood, strength, victory. I thought of the cold inside me that had sustained me. I thought of the scars that were no longer just mine, but Kattegat's. And I realized: This was my legacy. Not power. Memory.

I looked at my hands. They were no longer shaking. They were calm. Strong. Not because they could fight—but because they had stopped shaking.

"Perhaps," I said quietly, "someday you'll learn that pain is not your enemy. It's your teacher."

I laughed, hoarse, tired, but genuine. "I was a good student."

Then I stood up and looked up at the sky. The sun burned faintly over the sea. I said quietly, "A throne of scars. Not a bad place for a man who has never been able to sit."

And I walked back to the village. Slowly. Upright. With that quiet feeling that all that remains is enough.

Night came quietly, without wind, without fury. Only the sea was there, calm, black, vast. I sat on the shore, knees drawn up, axe beside me, fingers dug into the sand. It was cold, damp, alive. Every breath felt heavy, but good. It was the weight of staying.

Above me, the sky hung like an endless mirror. Stars, clear, sharp, old. I stared at them for a long time without blinking. They were calm, indifferent, but they

told stories I understood. I thought: Perhaps they are like scars. Born burning, now silent, beautiful because they are gone.

I pulled up my sleeve and looked at my skin. Lines, cuts, old marks. No pattern, no order. But they were mine. I ran my fingers over them, feeling every ripple, every wrinkle. I whispered, "You are all that remains. I don't need fame. It's enough for you that I'm still here."

I laughed quietly. No mockery, no pain. Just that small, honest laugh of a man who's finally got it.

The wind blew from the north, cool and clear. I breathed deeply. The salt tasted of memories. I looked out at the water, and the water looked back. I asked quietly, "How many more times?" The sea was silent. It was wiser than I was.

Behind me lay Kattegat, silent, sleeping, breathing. The fire in the hall smoldered, somewhere a dog barked, a child murmured in its sleep. Life. I turned briefly, saw it, and nodded. "Well done," I said. "You're holding up well."

I took the axe and placed it beside me as if it were a friend. I said, "You know, old thing, we've come a long way. More than we should have. And that's enough." I ran my finger over the blade, which had become blunt, almost tearing my skin. I liked the feeling. It was real.

Then I laid the axe flat in the sand, watching the sea almost touch it. A wave came, very light, licked the steel, and retreated. "That's good," I said. "Stay clean if you can."

I looked up at the sky again. A shooting star streaked through the darkness, swift, silent, and definitive. I followed it with my eyes until it disappeared. I thought: This is what I want. No grand ending. Just a brief streak of light, enough to show that I was there.

I lay back, my hands behind my head. The sand was cool, the sea breathed gently, the stars flickered above me. I thought of everything that was, and of nothing that must come.

"I'm tired," I whispered. "But not empty."

I closed my eyes, felt the sound of the sea become quieter, felt my breathing adjust to the rhythm.

"A throne of scars," I murmured. "And a sky of fire. That fits."

Then I smiled. Small, real, quiet. And let the night do what it does best — cover everything without taking anything.

I woke up as the sun fell on the sea. The light was warm, soft, honest. No wind, no storm. Only silence. I lay in the sand, the axe half-buried beside me. My bones were heavy, my head empty, but my heart beat calmly. This was new.

I sat up, rubbed my face, and looked out at the water. The sea was smooth as glass, a single breath of blue and gray. I thought: This is what peace looks like. Not big, not loud, just quiet.

I heard footsteps behind me. I didn't turn around. I knew who it was. The old man came, slowly, with his walking stick, his feet deep in the sand. "You sleep outside?" I nodded. "I wanted to see if the world still needed me." "And?" I grinned. "It doesn't. And that's a good thing."

He sat down next to me and looked out to sea. "You've become quiet." "I've made too much noise in my life." "And now?" "Now I'm listening."

He nodded and remained silent. We sat there, side by side, two men who had seen too much and yet were still breathing. That was enough.

After a while, he said, "Kattegat will need you. Not as a warrior. As something else." I laughed quietly. "I'm not good at 'something else'." "Then learn. There are no better teachers than scars."

I remained silent, looking at my hands. They were no longer shaking. They looked like tools, not weapons. I said quietly, "Maybe that's all it takes. Stop hurting if you can."

"That's greatness," said the old man. "That's tiredness," I replied. "Sometimes they're the same thing."

I stood up, slowly, heavily, but without pain. I looked at the village. Kattegat was awake. Women carried water, men mended roofs, children laughed. No cheering, no sorrow. Just life. Simple, raw, true.

I walked a bit, the sand cold beneath my feet. I heard the waves, the wood, the people shouting. I thought: This is my kingdom. Not the hall, not the throne. These voices, these hands, this breathing. This.

I stopped and turned back to the sea. The sun was now high, golden and friendly. I raised the axe and looked at the blunt blade. It had served me for a long time. I placed it in the water and watched the waves wash over it. It sank slowly, almost gracefully.

"Rest," I said. "Your work is done."

The old man stood behind me. "And yours?" I smiled. "Mine starts now."

I walked back to the village. Step by step. No pain, no anger, no goal. Just movement. That was all I had ever been able to do.

The people saw me and nodded. No king, no god, no hero. Just Ivar. I nodded back. And for a split moment, it felt like salvation.

I stopped in the middle of the square, took a deep breath, and let my gaze wander over Kattegat. The light fell on wood, on skin, on everything that remained. I said quietly, almost to myself: "A throne of scars. And finally, finally, peace."

Then I closed my eyes, smiled, and for the first time in my life I didn't need to laugh to feel alive.

The taste of salt and blood

The morning was clear, the light bright and sharp. I stood on the shore, my feet in the cold sand, and looked out at the sea. It was calm, almost too calm. The waves came in flat, steady, as if trying to deceive me. I smelled salt, and beneath the salt lay something else. Something metallic. I knew the smell. It never came for nothing.

Behind me, Kattegat was alive. The pounding of hammers, the shouts of women, the laughter of children. It was peace, but not the real peace. It was the peace you have when you know it will soon be over.

I knelt down and dipped my hand into the water. It was ice cold. I tasted it, smelled it, felt it. And there it was. That taste. Salt and blood. Not much, barely perceptible, but enough. I knew what that meant. The sea hides nothing.

I sat up and looked into the distance. Just a line on the horizon. Thin. Gray. Movement. Too small for waves, too regular for seagulls. I blinked. Ships. Still far away, but they were coming. Slowly. Silently.

I turned around and walked into the village. The old man stood in front of the hall, leaning on his stick. He saw me coming, and in his eyes was that knowledge that only old men have—the knowledge that quiet is always just the beginning of the next commotion. "What does the sea say?" he asked. "That it's hungry." He nodded. "Again?" "Always."

We walked to the square together. People saw us. I raised my hand. No big words, no panic. Just one sentence: "They're coming."

That was enough. Everyone knew what that meant. Men put down their tools, women brought their children into the house, the air became thicker, heavier. Peace is fragile. It smells when it dies.

I went to the hall and picked up my axe from the wall. It was still blunt from the last fight, but I liked it that way. A sharp sword is like a young man—too fast, too greedy. A blunt tool forces you to strike cleanly.

I stroked the handle and whispered, "Wake up, old beast." Then I looked out at the sea, which was now darkening. The ships were approaching. Still small, but no longer deniable.

The old man stepped next to me. "How many?" "Enough." "And you?" I grinned. "I'm fed up. But fed up is no reason to stop."

He smiled. "The taste of salt and blood." "Yes," I said quietly. "I missed him. And I hate myself for it."

The wind rose, the sea began to sing. No song, no comfort. Only this quiet, honest roar that says: *It's starting again.*

I took a deep breath, feeling the old trembling I'd missed for so long return. I didn't like it. But I needed it.

I looked at my hands, my scars, my story. I nodded. "All right," I whispered. "Then we'll dance again."

And the sea answered with a rumble so deep that even the gods heard it.

The sea never lies. It had become grayer, heavy, and restless. The waves were now thicker and harder. The wind had changed direction. I walked through Kattegat, slowly, step by step. People were working, not talking. Everyone knew what might happen. There was no need to explain anything to them. War hangs in the air, like an odor you can't get rid of.

I saw men checking shields, bundling arrows, and whet swords. Women cooking, mending, and sharpening knives. Even children helped, carrying wood, water, and salt. No one asked why. It was their way. They knew the sea didn't get louder for nothing.

I stopped by an old blacksmith whose hands had more scars than skin. He was striking iron, calmly, evenly, like someone who thinks about each blow. "How many blades?" I asked. "Fewer than necessary," he said without looking up. "As always." He grinned. "And still enough."

I nodded. "Then make her hot. Not pretty." "I only do honest things, Ivar."

I moved on. The old man was waiting outside the hall. His gaze was long and deep, like that of a sailor who has returned too many times. "They're ready again," he said. "For what?" "For what you give them." I grinned. "I don't give them anything. I just let them do what they can."

He stepped closer, his voice quiet. "And you?" "I'm tired from fighting, but the sea doesn't ask if you want to sleep."

He nodded. "Perhaps it wants to test you." "It has tested me many times. I passed. Several times." "Then it wants to break you." I smiled thinly. "Let it try. I'm already broken. I'm still alive."

We walked to the quay. The ships on the horizon were now larger, clearer. I saw banners, strange shapes. They bore no symbol I recognized. That made it worse. Unknown means unpredictable.

"When will they come?" asked the old man. "Before nightfall. Perhaps sooner." "And if they don't attack?" I laughed briefly. "Then we'll drink mead and pretend the world has grown wiser."

I turned around and looked at the village. Men were setting up watchtowers, women were bringing water, children were carrying arrows. It was a silent dance. Every step was precise, every look knew where it should go. War is not noise. War is order. And Kattegat had never understood it better than now.

I went back into the hall. The fire was burning brightly. I placed the axe on the table and looked at the blade. I whispered, "So it's you and me again." The axe gleamed dully, as if it were grinning.

I sat down and closed my eyes briefly. The wind howled outside, the sea sang its old song. It sounded like memory. Like guilt. Like life. I liked it.

"The taste of salt and blood," I murmured. "Old, bitter, but honest. Just like me."

I stood up and stepped outside. The sky was deep gray, almost black, even though the day wasn't over yet. The air smelled of rain and metal. I grinned. "All right," I said. "Come on then. I'm here."

I raised the axe and pointed it toward the sea. "You lost last time," I whispered. "I survived. And that's worse than dying."

The wind responded with a slap in the face, hard, cool, awake. I laughed, loudly, hoarsely, honestly.

"Yes," I shouted into the storm, "I missed you too!"

And somewhere out there, between the salt, the fog, and the rumble, the sea answered—not with words, but with the taste of something that had always wanted blood.

The sky tilted. Gray turned to black, light to shadow. The sea began to tremble. Not with waves, but intentionally. I stood on the quay, the wind blew sand into my face, and I tasted iron on my tongue again. The taste that never lies.

The ships were now clearly visible. Five. Maybe six. Large. Dark. No banner, no sign, no color. Just wood and sails, so black they ate the light. It was as if something ancient was coming. Something that had been here before there were names.

Behind me, Kattegat was silent. Too silent. No hammering, no shouting, no child. Just that slow, collective breathing, the whole village in a single heartbeat. I didn't turn around. I knew they all saw what I saw. I didn't want to look them in the eyes. I didn't want to see them hope again and lose again.

The old man came to my side. "Those aren't traders," he said. I grinned. "Too quiet. Traders make noise." "And you?" "I'm listening."

The ships approached, slowly, majestically, as if they knew time was on their side. The wind carried no shouts, no drums, nothing. Only the creaking of wood and the lapping of the waves.

I felt the trembling in my legs. Not fear. Anticipation. Like an animal that knows it's about to bite again. I hated myself for it, but I liked the feeling. It was old. Familiar. Real life.

"What do you think they want?" asked the old man. I looked out. "The same thing everyone wants. Something they're missing." "And what are you missing?" I grinned. "Nothing more. Maybe that's the problem."

A flash of lightning flashed far out over the water, brief, bright, silent. Then it was dark again. I looked up at the sky. No stars. No sun. Just this heavy gray that settled over everything like a blanket. I thought: Maybe this isn't a storm. Maybe this is a view.

I took a step closer to the sea. The water reached up to my boots, cold, wild, alive. I felt it in my bones. "You're late," I said quietly. "I was expecting you earlier."

The wind came stronger, ripping at my hair, tugging at my coat. It was as if the sea were breathing. Big. Deep. Old. I laughed, hoarse, ragged. "Come on. Show yourselves. I've got time."

Behind me, I heard footsteps. Men approached with weapons, shields on their shoulders, faces serious, calm, prepared. No heroes. Only survivors. I turned around. "Go back," I said. "We'll stay," one said. I shook my head. "Not every fight needs spectators." "Then none without you."

I grinned. "You learn too quickly."

I looked out again. The ships were now close enough to hear the wood. No shouting, no oar stroke. Just the quiet glide through the water. "Those aren't men," I murmured. "Then what?" "Memories."

The old man looked at me, not understanding, but nodded anyway. Sometimes silence is wiser than knowledge.

The first ship almost touched the sand. I raised the axe, slowly, calmly. It was blunt, heavy, honest. "So then again," I whispered. "Gods, ghosts, or men—I don't differentiate anymore."

I took a step into the water. The waves splashed around my ankles. I grinned. "The taste of salt and blood," I said quietly. "That's my language."

And when the first shadow left the deck, tall, silent, with a gaze older than the sun, I knew: the gods were not gone. They had only waited until I was old enough to answer them.

They came silently. No battle cry, no shout. Just the soft, steady lapping of the waves against their hulls, like a slow drumming from the depths. I stood in the water, axe in hand, and saw them coming.

The first ones emerged from the fog. Tall. Broad. Their armor was black, but not metal. Something else. Something that looked like stone, but moved like skin. Their faces were gray, empty, eyes so bright they were hard to look at. Neither human nor animal. Something in between.

I heard the men behind me breathe for the first time—that shaky, involuntary intake of air that happens when even courage briefly loses direction.

One of them stepped forward, so close I could see the vapor of his breath. He smelled of salt and death. I grinned. "You took your time," I said. No answer. Just one look, and that was enough. I raised the axe, slowly, calmly, not out of defiance, but out of habit. "All right," I said. "Then let's begin."

He took a step toward me. I hit him. The blow landed, dull, heavy, but there was no blood. Only a dull, wet splintering, like hitting living wood. He didn't fall. He looked at me as if I had merely woken him. I stepped back, the sand beneath me slippery and cold.

Behind me I heard men gathering, raising their shields, breaking the silence. An arrow flew, hit, and bounced off. Another followed, hissing, useless. They continued coming. I shouted, "Back! Into the alley!" The men obeyed, slowly retreating, not out of fear, but out of instinct. You don't fight things that don't know fear.

I stopped. The water reached my knees. I felt it getting colder.

Not the sea—the air. Something was sucking the warmth out of it. I looked up at the sky. It had turned black, without clouds. Just black.

As if the light has decided to stop playing along.

I heard the old man again. He stood on the bank, stick in hand, his voice steady. "What are these?" I grinned. "Answers." He shook his head. "Gods?" "If so, then ones that have been forgotten." They came closer, until only two steps

separated us. I looked into their faces. Empty. No anger. No life. Only this calm, deep knowing that told me they already knew me.

I raised the axe again, felt the trembling in my hands. Not from fear. From recognition. I said quietly, "I've seen you before. In dreams." No one answered, but I knew it was true. The first one moved, slowly, heavily, raised his hand, and the movement was not human, but not divine either. Something in between. I took a step back. The water lapped over my boots. "All right," I said. "Then at least talk. I hate it when people stay silent while they test me." Not a word. Just a look. Then a blow. Fast, precise, silent. I dodged, felt the wind, struck back. The axe struck, deeper this time. Something tore, hissed, and then—that smell. Salt. And blood.

I saw the blade, covered in a liquid, dark, shiny, viscous. It was steaming. I smelled it. The sea. The sea itself. I laughed. Loudly. Roughly. "You are made of what we live from!" I shouted. "You are the wave that comes back!" Someone behind me called my name. I barely heard it. I was already there, in that state where everything makes sense because you no longer expect anything. I tightened my grip, raised the axe above my head, and shouted, "Then take me if you can!" And the sea answered—not with words, but with a movement so vast, so ancient that even the sky fell silent.

The first impact was silent, just pressure. Then came the crash. A wave broke against the beach, hard as stone. I flew backward, landing heavily, axe lost, breath gone. Water slapped my face, cold, salty, alive. I tasted the sea, and the sea tasted me. I pulled myself together, watched them come. Not running, not wildly. Slowly. Like something in no hurry, because it knows time is its own. Their bodies gleamed in the gray light, half flesh, half salt, skin like wet bark, eyes without color. The men behind me screamed, arrows flew, shields crashed, the water was up to their chests. The sea had risen, as if it had itself decided to live again.

I searched for the axe, found it, and pulled it up. The blade was heavy, the wood slippery. I screamed, just to hear that I was still there. The first one was with me again. I struck. The blow went through him, as if through fog, and yet something splashed, a viscous, dark liquid that smelled of iron. I laughed, screamed, struck again. He didn't fall. He melted. And where he fell, steam rose, as if the sea itself were breathing. I stumbled backward, the water up to my hips. Behind me, one of my men fell. He went under silently, as if the sea had simply swallowed him. No scream, no resistance, only silence.

I didn't turn around. I couldn't. Another man attacked me, from the side, quickly, silently. I turned, hit him in the shoulder with the axe, and this time I felt the resistance. He let out a sound, not a scream, more like a long, deep growl that I heard not in my ear, but in my chest. I laughed. "Finally," I said. "A conversation." He grabbed my arm, his hand cold, hard, like stone. I pulled the axe free, struck him in the neck. Something tore, something steamed, something died. Or pretended to.

I fell into the water. The sea pulled at me, as if it wanted to pull me in, as if it wanted me back. I fought, kicked, gasped. I heard the old man calling, far away, as if from a dream. Then the next wave came. It crashed over me, carried me away, rolled me, slammed me to the bottom. I opened my eyes, underwater, and saw them. Faces. Many. Pale, silent, with open mouths, moving but unable to breathe, unable to find words. I knew some. Men I had lost. Women I had known. Children. All there, in the depths, between salt and darkness.

I stared at them. They stared back. And then I heard it. Not loudly. Not with my ear. With my whole body. *You are one of us.* I hauled myself up, broke through the surface, gasped for air, screamed. Not out of fear. Out of rage. "I'm not one of you!" I roared. "I'm not water! I'm not your flesh!" The sky thundered. The sea answered. A wave crashed over me. I fell again. This time I landed in the sand, clutching the axe tightly. I coughed, spat, smelled blood. My blood. I looked at my hands. Salt crust. Cracks. Red. I grinned, spat into the sea, and said quietly, "Then taste me too, you old bastard."

The sea retreated, just a little, like an animal briefly considering whether to bite again. I slowly stood up. The men behind me gathered their composure. Breaths, blows, voices. Kattegat stood again. And I stood with it. I looked out, the ships still there, the shadows even closer. But they hesitated. Only briefly. Enough to know: The sea now knew my name. I grinned. "Good," I said. "Now we're even." And in that moment, amidst the salt, blood, and wind, I felt more alive than ever.

Because I finally understood: I never fought against the sea. I fought against what it reflected in me. I stood there, the sand beneath me muddy, the water around my boots warm with blood. Not all of it was mine. Maybe none of it was mine at all. I didn't know. I only knew that I was tired. Not physically. Deeply. So tired that even anger couldn't find a home anymore.

The figures were still standing there. Not many. Five, maybe six. They looked at me, barely moving. Their faces—no hostility, no triumph. Only this silent, incomprehensible knowledge. I recognized something in them. Me. I was

breathing heavily. The axe hung loosely in my hand. I could no longer hold it properly. Not because it was too heavy, but because it was pointless. Every blow had received the same response. None. And at some point you realize you're fighting against water.

I laughed. Short, harsh, honest. "You're not real," I said. "You're what remains when you lose too much." One came closer. Slowly, quietly. He stopped in front of me, so close I could smell the scent. Not death. Not life. Memory. I half-raised the axe, then lowered it. "You want to test me?" I asked. Silence. Only the wind. I took a step closer, felt the water around my ankles. "You're not here to kill me. You're here so I can do it myself."

And then—for a moment—something moved in his face. No expression, no word. Just that slight twitch, like the wind blowing through tall grass. I laid the axe down. Slowly. Carefully. The metal touched the sand, and in that moment the sea stopped raging. It was as if someone had turned the world down. The men behind me shouted, "Ivar!" But I just raised my hand. "Don't," I said. "No more hitting."

The sea calmed. The waves retreated. The figures stood still. Then, one by one, they sank into the water. No scream, no struggle, no death. Only silence. I watched until there was nothing left. Only the sea. And my breath. I fell to my knees, letting my hands sink into the sand. It was cold, but it no longer trembled. I whispered, "I understand you. You were never enemies. You were what I became." The wind picked up, gentle, almost friendly. I smiled. "Good," I said. "Then we're done."

I raised the axe, looked at it. Blunt. Heavy. Honest. I kissed the blade. "You were good," I whispered. "But we're through." I hurled it into the sea. It spun, slid into the water, disappeared. Not a sound. No resistance. I stayed there, on my knees, hands full of sand, heart empty but light. And the sea, that eternal beast, breathed calmly again. I knew it wasn't a victory. But it was something different. More honest. Purer.

I stood up, looked into the distance, and for the first time in a long time, the sea smelled not of blood, but of a new beginning. "I am no longer your warrior," I said quietly. "But I am still here." And the wind carried that further, out into the gray, where stories end and rebirths begin. I walked slowly back. The sand stuck to my legs, the wind dried the salt on my skin. The sea was calm again, just a roar, an old friend who no longer threatened me.

I turned around once and looked out. Nothing. No ships, no shadows. Just waves doing what they always do—come, go, forget. I continued on, up the slope, back to Kattegat. The men stood there, silent, uncertain. They looked at me, questioning, alert, ready to fight, but without a goal. I raised my hand, not commanding, not regal. Just calm. "Over," I said. That was all.

They looked at each other, not understanding, but feeling it. The wind had changed. The sky had become brighter. And the sea no longer smelled of blood. I walked through them, slowly, heavily, my footsteps deep in the ground. No one called, no one asked. Only this respect, which comes not from fear, but from the realization that someone has seen something you yourself never wanted to see.

The old man was waiting outside the hall. He leaned against the wood, his hands tightly gripping his cane. "You survived," he said. I grinned. "This time without victory." He nodded. "Perhaps that was victory." I stepped closer and sat down on the steps. The wood was warm from the sun. I placed my hands on my knees and looked up at the sky. The clouds drifted slowly, peacefully, like fed animals. "What were they?" the old man asked. I shrugged. "Mirrors, perhaps. Or debts. Or both." - "And you?" - "I paid them."

He nodded and remained silent. I liked that. Too many people talk when silence is the only language that still has any value. Children ran past the edge of the square, laughing, shouting, living. One stopped and looked at me. "Did you win?" he asked. I smiled. "I stopped losing." He nodded and kept running. I watched him. His footsteps splashed water into the sun, little sparks of light. I thought: This is what life looks like when you leave it alone.

The old man sat down next to me. "You're different," he said. "No," I said. "I'm finally me." I laughed, not loudly, not for long, just that honest, tired laugh that comes when you've seen the whole world and still don't hate it. I stood up and looked at the sea one last time. It was beautiful. Calm. Real. I whispered, "The taste of salt and blood... It remains. But it doesn't hurt anymore." Then I turned around and walked into the hall, without a crown, without a title, without anger. Just me. And in that moment I knew: I was no god. No hero. No curse. I was simply Ivar—and that was enough.

Men without shadows

For three days the sea remained calm. No storm, no wind, no scream. Only the gentle lapping of the waves, like a breath taking a breath. Kattegat was alive, but not loudly. People spoke little, ate slowly, and slept early. They knew something had happened, even if they didn't understand it. They smelled it. Everyone smelled it.

I walked through the alleys, barefoot, without a coat, without a weapon. The ground was wet, cold, honest. I liked the feeling. Wood, dirt, life. No more stage, no place for kings. Only footsteps that count because they are silent. Men sat in front of the houses, silent, smoking, staring. Their faces gray, their eyes empty. Some had scratches, others nothing at all. But they all looked the same. Like men who had seen something you couldn't describe without your voice breaking.

I stopped next to someone I knew. Håvard. A tall man, broad-backed, always laughing, even in battle. Now he looked at me, and there was nothing in his eyes. Only mirrors. "You're alive," I said. "Unfortunately for me," he replied. "We all live to the detriment of someone else." He nodded, looked back at the sea. "I can still see them." - "Who?" - "The shadows in the water. When I blink, they're there." I nodded. "Then blink less." He grinned. Briefly, weakly, but genuinely. "You're a bastard, Ivar." - "I know." I moved on.

A few children were playing in the dirt, but without laughter. No singing, no running. Just silent movement, like animals that know they have to be quiet when something bigger is nearby. I stopped and watched them. One raised its head and looked at me. "Will the sea come back?" it asked. "Always," I said. "Then we go?" - "No," I said. "Then we stay." The child nodded. It understood more than most men. I kept walking. The sun came out, pale, tired. The sky looked as if it had cried too much. I liked it that way. No lies. No radiance. Only light that remains, even when it hurts.

I arrived at the smithy. The old blacksmith was there, back at work, as if nothing had happened. The hammer fell rhythmically, calmly. "You're working again," I said. "What else am I supposed to do?" - "Breathe." - "I do that on the side." I grinned. "You were never good at rest." He paused, looked at me. "And you were never good at stopping." - "Then we have something in common." He put the hammer aside, wiped the sweat from his brow. "Men aren't the same anymore." - "No one is." - "You neither." I looked at him, said nothing. He smiled. "I knew it. The sea never takes only those it swallows." I left the smithy, walked down to the beach. The water was clear, peaceful, almost beautiful. I

stood there for a long time, my feet in the sand, and looked out. I thought: They're all still there. Just without shadows. I raised my hand, looked at them. She trembled slightly, not from fear, but from memory. I whispered, "I see them too, Håvard. I see them all." The wind picked up, bringing the smell of salt. I smiled. "Maybe they belong here now," I said. "Maybe they always have."

I turned around and looked back at the village. Men, women, children – all moved, but none alive in the old sense. They functioned. Like clocks without hands. I thought: This is them now. Men without shadows. And I am their king. No throne. No war. No victory. Only echoes. I called them together, that evening, in the square in front of the hall. No orders, no horn, no call. I simply went out, stood there, and they came. As always. Because they knew nothing else but to follow. They stood there, rows of faces, gray from smoke, from the sea, from lack of sleep. No one spoke. Only the quiet crunching of leather, metal, sand. I looked at them and thought: This is what post-war looks like. Not glory. Not celebration. Just skin over souls still on the move.

I waited until the silence became too heavy. Then I said, "You're alive." No answer. "That's enough." A murmur. Someone coughed. I moved on. "You saw it. You felt it. The sea tested you. And you're still standing." A man from the crowd called out, "But why?" I looked at him. Young, but with old eyes. "Because there's no reason," I said. "And that's what makes it real." Another stepped forward. His cheek was scarred, his eye cloudy. "We can't sleep," he said. "If we close our eyes, we see them. The faces. The shadows." I nodded. "Me too." "What are we supposed to do?" I grinned wearily. "Breathe. Keep going. Chopping wood. Pretend life is easy. Until someday it is again." "And if it never gets easy again?" "Then at least stay honest."

I stepped closer, looked at them all. Rows of men who have seen too much and are now waiting for someone to explain why they're still here. But there's no explanation for survival. Only the bare fact that it's you. "You're looking for meaning," I said. "Forget that. Meaning is for gods and dreamers. We are neither. We are what remains when the rest have drowned." A few nodded. Others looked at the ground. That was enough. I didn't want heroes. I wanted them to keep breathing. "We rebuild," I said. "Not because it matters. But because it's the only thing that remains." I turned and left. No cheering, no shouting, just movement. Wood was being carried, fires lit, tools fetched. Kattegat was working again, not out of hope, but out of habit. I stood at the edge, watching them. The shadows moved with them, unseen, but palpable. I thought: These aren't men. These are memories that have learned to walk.

I sat down on a rock, looked at my hands. Scars, dirt, salt. All still there. I whispered, "I am one of you. A man without a shadow." The old man sat behind me. He said nothing. He didn't have to. We both watched the village move again. Slowly. Toughly. Alive, but only just. "Do you think they heal?" he asked after a while. I laughed. "Heal? No. But they learn to walk with the wound. And that's enough." He nodded. "And you?" I looked at the sea. "I've lost count." Then I fell silent. And in that silence lay something that felt almost like peace. Not the great, not the eternal—just the small peace that remains when you've lost everything else.

Night came slowly, like an animal that knows it no longer frightens anyone. I sat by the fire with the men. No throne, no distance, just cold earth beneath my feet and a cup in my hand. Mead, stale, bitter, but real. One poured more without asking. That was new. Before, they would have hesitated. Now they were simply human. The flames cast long shadows, the faces in them old, tired, but somehow soft. We didn't talk much. Sometimes silence is the only thing that remains honest when words begin to lie. One of them, the youngest, finally broke the silence. "Are you afraid, Ivar?" I took a sip, let the taste in my mouth. "Always." - "Even now?" - "Especially now." - "Because you know what's coming?" - "Because I know something's always coming." A few laughed quietly. Not out of mockery, but because they understood. That laughter that is more pain than joy, but still feels good.

I looked into the fire. The flames danced lazily, the wood crackled, sparks rose, then fell again, like small, failed stars. I liked the image. "We're like that," I said. "Fine as long as we burn, but no one remembers the smoke." The old blacksmith nodded. "You're becoming poetic, King." - "Only when I drink." - "Then drink more often." A quiet laugh went around. Someone played with a piece of coal, rolling it in a circle. This was their new game. No fighting, no blood, just movement. There was something peaceful about it. Another said: "You used to give us orders." - "I know." - "Not anymore?" - "I've learned that command and trust are two different languages. And I'm tired of translating." - "Then we'll trust you differently now." - "Then at least it's worth something," I said.

A gust of wind blew in from the sea, making the fire flicker. We all looked briefly, reflexively, like animals that know that everything comes from the sea. Then our gazes returned, to the embers, the hands, the cups. Life. I felt the tiredness coming, not physically, but deeply. That calm feeling that says: You don't have to prove anything anymore today. I put the axe down next to me, didn't reach for it. No one did. It just lay there, like an old word that no one uses anymore, but no one forgets. The boy from before whispered, "Are you

still our king?" I looked at him, the fire reflected in his eyes. "Am I?" I asked back. He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No," he said. "You're something else." - "That's enough for me."

I leaned back, looked at the stars, which pretended to listen. I thought: Maybe this is what I've always wanted—not power, not victory, but a fire that remains, even when no one is fighting anymore. I looked at the men, their faces stroked by the light, the shadows small. No more anger, no more commands, just this silent acceptance that one is alive. "Men without shadows," I murmured. "But at least warm." And for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel alone, but simply there, among them, without a title, without guilt, just skin that breathed again.

I woke up because the sun was too curious. The fire had long since gone out, leaving only gray ash, rising into the air in small threads of dust. Beside me lay men wrapped in furs, breathing softly, like stones remembering their warmth. I sat up, felt the ground still damp with dew, and looked out over Kattegat. Smoke rose from the chimneys, birds circled over the harbor, and somewhere I heard the faint tap of a hammer. That was music, better than any battle song. I liked that sound—rough, rhythmic, the kind of sound that says, "We're still alive."

I stood up and walked barefoot across the cold ground. The wood was slippery from the rain, the wind carried salt into the air. Kattegat smelled of everyday life again. Of fish, sweat, wood, of things that last. I paused for a moment and looked around. Women were hanging laundry, children were running between the huts, men were repairing roofs. No one was waiting for orders. Everyone knew what to do. I went to the smithy. The old blacksmith was there again, with soot on his face and embers in his eyes. He was beating iron, calmly, evenly. I stopped. "You never stop, do you?" He grinned. "If you let it, it rusts." - "Does that apply to you or the iron?" - "For both." I laughed softly. "You're getting old." - "I was already old when you were still crawling, Boneless." - "And yet you're still alive." - "Perhaps because I never stopped doing instead of thinking." "Then you're wiser than most gods," I said. He laughed loudly and spat into the fire. "Gods think too much. Humans are better off dying."

I let him keep hammering and went to the quay. The sea was smooth, pale blue, innocent. As if nothing had ever happened. I sat down, dangled my legs, felt the wind on my skin. Behind me, I heard voices. The men were awake, laughing, rubbing their hands against each other, like they used to, but different. Quieter. With less weight in their chests. They began to mend the village, without me, without questions, without orders. This was what I wanted,

without knowing I wanted it. I looked out to sea. "You're still here," I murmured. "But so am I."

A boy came to me, the same narrow face as the one from the fire. "What are you doing, Ivar?" - "I'm waiting." - "For what?" - "For life." - "Will it come back?" - "It's already here. Only more quietly." He sat down next to me, silent, looking at the water. His feet splashed against the waves. We said nothing more. Sometimes silence is enough when you see the same thing. The sea glittered. Kattegat breathed. And I thought: Maybe that's heroism when you learn not to be needed. I stood up and patted the boy on the shoulder. "Come on," I said. "Let's build something." - "What?" - "It doesn't matter. The main thing is that it lasts." He grinned. And somewhere, in that boy's quiet laughter, I heard the beginning of a new era. No heroes. No shadows. Just people.

I sat on a boulder at the edge of the square. The stone was warm from the sun, my back heavy from doing nothing. I watched them work. How they walked, talked, built. Kattegat sounded like the future again. Not big, not loud – just real. Men carried beams, women mended nets, children collected leftover wood. Movement everywhere. And no one needed me. That hit me harder than any wound. I thought of all the years I spent believing that without me nothing worked. That I was the driving force, the will, the anger. And now I saw: That was a lie, the one I needed to keep going. The truth was simpler. I wasn't the reason. I was just the beginning. And the beginning is only important until something grows that stands without you.

I saw Håvard, the tall, quiet one. He laughed again. Not much, but honestly. His hands covered in dirt, his eyes clearer. He saw me, raised his hand briefly. I nodded back. That was enough. No words. Just this small, silent acknowledgement. I noticed the old man watching me from the hall, his stick at his side, his gaze calm. I went to him. "You look content," he said. "I'm not," I replied. "But I pretend." - "That's enough sometimes." - "I'm no longer a king." - "Then perhaps you'll finally be yourself." - "And what do you do with that?" He shrugged. "Breathe. Wait. See if the sun comes out again tomorrow." I sat down on the steps next to him. He handed me a piece of bread. Hard, dry, but better than any feast. We ate in silence. The sky was clear, the air smelled of ash and salt. "They still need you," he said after a while. - "For what?" - "For what you can't see." - "And that would be?" - "To survive, even when you think you can't anymore." I nodded. He was right, and I hated that he always knew it.

I stood up again and walked through the village. Hands, movement, voices everywhere. I felt strange, but not excluded. Like a ghost that stays, not to rule, but to remember. I walked to the sea. The waves were calm, almost friendly. I

sat down, letting the sand trickle through my fingers. It was dry, light, changeable. I thought: This is life. You can't hold on to it. You can only feel it as it slips through your fingers. I looked at my hands. Scars. Memory. History. I whispered, "Perhaps this was all I was meant to be—not to lead, but to bear witness."

A seagull landed next to me and stared at me, crooked and cheeky, like something that knows no fear. I threw her a piece of bread. She grabbed it and flew away.

I grinned. "I envy you," I said. "You don't have to remember anything." The wind picked up, carrying the sounds of Kattegat to me. Children laughed, metal clanged, a hammer fell. Life was loud again. And I knew: I was part of it. But no longer the center.

I stood up, looked up at the sky, and took a deep breath. "This is what peace feels like," I said. "Not like victory. Like making room." Then I walked back to the village, through people who once again had shadows.

I sat behind the hall, where the light dims and the wind carries the smoke. The fire in front of me was small but warm, and I liked the way it smelled—of resin, soot, and memories. Kattegat lay quietly behind me, the voices quieter, the footsteps less frequent. A village that breathed, not fought. I breathed with it.

I held a piece of wood in my hand, mindlessly carving notches into it. Nothing significant. Just movement, to know I was still there. The blade slid, the wood creaked. Sometimes you don't need a purpose, just a sound to accompany you. I thought of the days before—the sea, the shadows, the faces I couldn't forget. They still came, at night, when I closed my eyes. But they no longer screamed. They just stood there, looking at me, and I looked back. No struggle. Just mutual understanding.

I was never good at letting go. I always wanted to hold on, control, possess. People, countries, gods. But everything I held eventually slipped through my fingers, like sand that can't be held, no matter how tightly you grip. Now I held on to nothing. And that felt lighter. I was no longer a king. Perhaps never had been. Kings need witnesses, and I no longer had any. What I did have was this fire, this light, breathing quietly into the night.

I took the cup and drank the rest of the mead, which had warmed up. It tasted bitter, but honest. I liked the bitterness. It doesn't lie. Behind me, I heard footsteps. Slowly, carefully. The old man. He sat down next to me without

speaking. We both looked into the fire. After a while, he said, "You've become quiet." "Finally," I said. "The world is loud enough." He nodded. "I can tell you're breathing differently." "How?" "Like someone who's stopped trying to prove themselves." I grinned. "Then it was time."

He looked at me. "Are you happy, Ivar?" I considered it. The word tasted strange. "No," I said. "But I'm not unhappy. That's enough." We continued sitting there, the embers diminishing, the shadows lengthening. The wind brought the sea closer, that endless roar that never asks why you're listening. I thought: Maybe the sea was never my enemy. Maybe it was my mirror.

I looked at my hands. They were still. For the first time in years. Not a twitch, not a tremor. Just calm. "You know," I said, "I always thought freedom meant not needing anyone. But maybe it means not having to hurt anyone anymore." The old man nodded. "And you've stopped hurting yourself?" - "Sometimes." - "That's enough."

He stood up and walked slowly to the hall. I stayed seated. The fire was almost out, just embers, red, tired, beautiful. I reached out my hands toward it, not to warm myself, but to feel that something was alive. Above me, the stars moved, slowly, calmly, like a gathering of memories. I thought: This is not how war ends. This is how peace begins. I smiled, quietly, honestly, and whispered, "Perhaps I am not a king without a kingdom after all. Perhaps I am a man with peace." Then I let the fire die down, put the knife aside, and watched as the night took over.

Morning came quietly. No shout, no horn, no command. Only light, gently spreading over the rooftops, like a hand that no longer wants to strike. I sat outside the hall, my eyes open, but my gaze still somewhere between dream and day. The fire had long since gone out. The smoke had cleared. Everything was clean, as after a long rain. I heard the sea, vast, calm, that eternal sound that never stops, but never repeats itself either.

People began to move. Women with baskets, children with voices, men with tools. No one was waiting for me. No one was looking. I had become part of the landscape. No king. No enemy. No symbol. Only Ivar. I stood up, stretched, felt my bones crack. A familiar pain. But this time, friendly. I liked it. It reminded me that I was still here.

I went to the quay, where the water kisses the land, and looked out. The sea was clear, the sun was gentle, the air full of salt. I thought: This is what a new beginning looks like—not loud, not proud, but quiet, honest, patient. Håvard

came. He carried a net over his shoulder and smelled of work and earth. "You're going," he said. "I'm going," I answered. "Where to?" "Somewhere where no one knows my name." "Will you come back?" I grinned. "Maybe. If I forget why I left." He nodded and offered me his hand. Large, rough, real. I took it. "We'll keep building," he said. "Do that," I replied. "But don't build because you have to. Build because you can."

He nodded and left again without turning around. That was good. I liked goodbyes that needn't end. I stayed alone. Just the sea and me. I took the bag I'd packed yesterday. Nothing big in it. A piece of bread, a knife, a talisman my mother once gave me. I didn't need anything more. I looked back at Kattegat. The village stood still, as if frozen in the light. I remembered everything—the blood, the anger, the laughter, the nights when I thought I was immortal. And I smiled. Not wistfully, not proudly. Just genuinely.

I stepped into the water. It was cold, but not hostile. I let it rise to my knees, felt it cooling my scars. "I'll be fine," I whispered. "Without you. With you. As it's meant to be." The wind answered, once, softly, like a breath. I nodded. "I know." Then I went back to the shore, sat down on the old stone where I used to give orders. Now it was just a stone. I took out the knife, carved a word into it. Not a name. Just a sign. A simple circle. The symbol for beginning. Or end. Depends how you read it.

I stood up and looked up at the sky. It was vast, pale, open. "No more shadows," I said quietly. "Only light that doesn't blind." I walked, slowly, along the path that led out, away from the sea, away from Kattegat. No farewell, no destination. Only steps. One after the other. And behind me, nothing remained, except smoke, memories, and men who had learned to live without shadows.

When legends lie

I walked for days, aimless, directionless. The sky was gray, the land empty, and the world smelled of cold earth. I liked that. No one asked who I was, no one recognized me. I was finally just a body, moving because it was used to it. The paths were muddy, the nights silent. I slept under trees, in abandoned huts, sometimes by the river, where the water spoke as the sea never did. I listened. Water doesn't lie. It always tells you where you stand—or whether you've long since been washed away.

After three days, I reached a village. Small, crooked, with more smoke than life. Children ran between the huts, women carried water, men looked over suspiciously. I looked like someone who had stories in his shoes. And people fear stories that still breathe. I walked over to the fireplace in the square. An old man was telling something, loudly, with his hands, with gestures. Children sat around him, wide-eyed, open-mouthed. I stopped and listened. "He came on a cart made of bones," the old man said, "and the earth shook beneath him. His eyes were cold as the ice in the north, and wherever he stepped, no grass grew. They called him the Boneless. He laughed when others died and drank blood instead of mead." The children shrieked, frightened, fascinated. I remained silent. I knew who he meant. The old man continued: "And when the sun turned against him, he went into the sea to speak with the dead. But the gods took him because they were afraid of him. Now his spirit wanders between the worlds, searching for a heart he never had."

The children held on tight. A small hand pointed in my direction. "Like that one?" The old man looked at me, his eyes small, scrutinizing, suspicious. "Not as bad as he seems," he finally said. "He looks more human." Laughter. Relief. The children laughed, the tension dissipated. I laughed along, quietly, honestly. I stepped closer to the fire. "You tell good stories," I said. The old man nodded. "You have to, otherwise they won't sleep." - "And you believe them?" - "Belief is expensive. I only borrow it when it gets dark." I liked him immediately. A man who knew that words are warmer than truth. "And this Boneless One," I asked, "what do you think—was he so bad?" The old man looked into the fire. "Bad? No. Just real. And that's enough to make legends."

I nodded, looked into the flames. They danced, just like they did back then. I thought: Maybe this is the price. The more you become yourself, the more others will make you into something they need. A god. A monster. A fairy tale. I said, "Sometimes legends lie because they can't bear the fact that their heroes were also tired." The old man smiled. "Then you're a wise stranger." - "Just someone who listened too long." I stayed, drank with them, ate bread, heard stories that were about me but were no longer mine. I left them as they were. One shouldn't correct lies if they make someone's night easier. Later, when the fire died down, I left. The old man called after me: "What's your name, stranger?" I turned around and smiled. "No one who needs to know." He nodded, satisfied, as if he'd been expecting the answer. I went out into the night, and for the first time, I felt free of my name. Maybe this was true death. Or the first real life.

I continued south. Three days, maybe four. Time lost its grip, like wet sand between my fingers. I slept where there was space, ate what was left, and

hardly spoke. It was pleasant not to be needed. A shadow without direction. A man without a story, who only pretended to have one. But the world didn't want to forget me. In every village, a new version of me waited. I heard myself everywhere, but never really. In a place that stank of fish and smoke, they said the Boneless One had cursed the sky. He had cheated Odin, betrayed Loki, and eaten his brothers. The children trembled, the old people spat when they whispered my name. I didn't drink there. I moved on.

A few miles later, I came to a village where they worshipped me as a god. There stood a wooden statue, my legs missing, my eyes made of glass. They prayed to me for rain, for strength, for victories that would never come. I stood there, looking at myself, and felt nothing. No pride, no anger. Only this quiet, bitter realization: Every lie is just truth left alone for too long. An old priest came, looked at me, felt something. He asked, "Do you know the Boneless One?" - "A little." - "Then you know he's still alive?" I grinned. "Maybe. But if he does, he's tired of hearing about himself." The priest laughed. "Legends don't die." - "Yes, they do," I said. "They just start eating themselves." I stayed overnight, slept next to the statue. It looked at me in the moonlight, expressionless, holy.

I thought: Maybe that's the trick—first you hate, then you remember, then you adore, and eventually you forget why you did it in the first place. The next morning I moved on. The same pattern everywhere: a name, a myth, a truth drowning in alcohol and fear. In one village they called me the Bloodborn. In another the God of Vengeance. One even said I tamed the sea with a look. I laughed out loud. The sea never laughs back. I realized they all needed something. No one wanted to know what it was really like. They wanted to believe monsters existed so they could belittle their own. I let them. What's the point of pouring truth into ears long since deafened by longing?

Once, in a tavern, I heard a young man boast: "I'm like Ivar! I fear nothing!" I drank my mead, leaned back, and looked at him. He was strong, full of life, but his eyes were empty. I said quietly: "Then you fear everything." He didn't understand. How could he? I left the tavern, went out into the night. The wind was cool, the sky open. I saw the stars. Maybe the same ones I'd seen in Kattegat. Maybe not. But they were real. That was enough.

I sat down on a rock, saw my reflection in a puddle. My face old, my eyes clear. I whispered, "So there you are, legend. Liar. Survivor." I grinned. "Nice to meet you." Then I spat into the water, and the reflection distorted, dissolved. I thought: Perhaps this was the last vestige of glory. And it was a good thing. I lay down, under an open sky, without fire, without a name. The wind sang stories that no longer concerned me. And I slept, for the first time, without memory.

The village was larger than the others, louder, more colorful. The houses stood closer together, the air filled with smoke and the smell of beer, fish, and people. I arrived late in the afternoon, when the sun was already low in the sky. A crowd had gathered in the square. A man with a lute stood on an upturned barrel, and around him, they hung on his words as if they were hearing a revelation. I stood at the edge, a stranger with a face no one wanted to read. And then I heard it. My name.

"Ivar the Boneless, son of Ragnar, Butcher of Kings, Curse of the North..." The singer had a voice that touched people's hearts. I listened as he told my story. But it wasn't my story. In his version, I was a god who could catch fire with my bare hands. I defeated giants, I broke mountains, I killed men who had never existed. They clapped, cheered, screamed. And I stood there, not knowing whether to laugh or vomit.

He sang that I had betrayed my brothers, that I had drunk my father's blood and built a castle with the bones of my enemies. I looked into the faces of the people. No one doubted it. They wanted to believe it. Because lies burn more beautifully than the truth. And maybe, I thought, they were even right.

I ordered a mead and sat down on an old bench at the edge. The barman looked at me briefly, the way you look at someone you'd rather not know. I drank and kept listening. The singer was good. Too good. He had rhythm, he had venom in his tongue, and he knew that pain sells better when it shines.

I closed my eyes and saw images. Not of battles or glory. Of rain. Of blood that cools too quickly. Of men I liked before they died. And of a sea that never wanted to forget me. I opened my eyes and laughed softly.

After the song, he came to me. He wanted to know who I was. I said, "Just a traveler." He grinned. "Then you're in luck, traveler. Today I'm singing about the greatest who ever lived." "Oh, really?" I asked. "And who was that?" "Ivar the Boneless," he said proudly. "He was more than a man." "Or less," I said.

He looked at me strangely. "You talk like you knew him." I looked into my cup. "Maybe I saw him. Once. Very briefly." "What was he like?" asked the singer. I smiled. "Exhausted."

He laughed as if it were a joke and moved on. I stayed seated. The crowd wanted more. They sang along to his chorus, drank, screamed, lived. I looked at

them and thought: This is how you become immortal. Not through actions, but through people forgetting that you were real.

Later, when the square was empty, I went to him. He was sitting behind the tavern, counting coins. I asked, "Why do you tell these stories?" He shrugged. "Because people need them. They want to believe someone was greater than them." "And if he wasn't?" "Then they make it up. That's their right."

I nodded. "So you're a merchant." "No," he said, "I'm a mirror. I show them what they want to be." I smiled. "Then you're more dangerous than any warrior." He grinned. "Perhaps. But I bring hope, not a blade." "Hope lies better than any blade."

I turned to leave, then stopped. "Next time you sing about Ivar," I said, "tell them that he was tired. That he could laugh sometimes. And that in the end, he just wanted to live." The singer frowned. "That's not a good story." "Yes, it is," I said. "But nobody likes to hear it."

I walked into the darkness, the wind cold on my face. Behind me, it started playing again. The same melody. The same lie. And yet it was beautiful. I stopped for a moment, listened, and thought: Maybe it never mattered whether it was true. Maybe I just wanted someone to sing it.

I walked when the village was asleep. No torches, no moon. Only the path ahead of me, leading nowhere. The singer's song still hung in the air, like a residue of smoke that wouldn't dissipate. I could hardly distinguish the words anymore, only the sound. My name. My name again and again, so foreign that it sounded like someone else's. I kept walking. The fields smelled of earth and autumn, the grass was damp, and somewhere a dog barked. I liked that sound. It reminded me that someone was still awake.

I thought about the singer. About his voice, about the faces of the people hanging on his every word. I wondered if I had ever looked like that. So sure. So tall. I knew they were talking about someone else, not me. I was the man in their stories, but not the one in my head. And that was perhaps the worst thing: living while others had long since invented you.

I stopped for a moment, looking into the darkness. It was thick, heavy, like old oil. I thought: Perhaps this is the punishment for heroes—that they must survive to see what will be made of them. I lit a pipe, the smoke rose crookedly, disappeared. The wind carried it away, and I imagined my story flying away in the same way, slowly, indifferently.

The truth is a poor animal. It can't scream, it can't defend itself. The lie is more beautiful. It wears jewelry, it smiles, it smells good. And in the end, everyone wants to sleep next to it. I laughed quietly. I used to be strong. I killed men, burned cities, insulted the heavens. And now I'm talking to myself, in the middle of the night, somewhere among the fields and shadows. Maybe that was fairer than I thought.

I continued walking, over a bridge whose railing smelled of algae. A river flowed beneath me, still and black. I stopped and looked down. I saw my reflection, but it was too dark to recognize me. Just outlines, movement, wind on water. I said, "You look good for a dead man." Then I laughed again. I laughed a lot these days, but never really out loud. It was the laughter of a man who realizes that the world goes on, even if he doesn't.

I thought of Kattegat, of the sea, of the men who had shadows again. I wondered if they sometimes thought of me. Perhaps they were telling stories of their own now, different ones, their own. And I wished they would. Not because I was important, but because stories are the only thing that survives. Even when they lie.

I sat down on the edge of the bridge, dangled my legs, smoked, and drank the last of the mead from my pouch. It tasted stale, bitter. Like a memory. I thought: Maybe that's the price of truth—it grows old, it grows tired, and eventually it tastes like something you've held in your mouth for too long.

Birds flew above me, night birds, silently, like thoughts you can't shake off. I watched them until they disappeared. Then I stood up and continued walking, step by step, without a destination. The path was narrow, and the grass grew tall. I liked the way it brushed against my legs. It felt like life.

I thought: The legend isn't me. I'm the one who remains when it's over. I'm the aftertaste, the sound that lingers in the room long after the applause has died down. And maybe that was enough. Maybe it was even better that way.

At some point I stopped and looked up at the sky. The stars were pale, as if they'd seen too much. I said, "If you see me, forget me. Tell them I smiled before I left." Then I moved on. No destination, no plan. Just one step at a time, into the darkness that slowly no longer recognized me.

I found the hut on the fifth day. It stood at the edge of a forest, half-ruined, the roof sagging, the door crooked. No smoke, no sound. I knocked anyway, out of habit. No one answered. I entered. Inside, it smelled of damp wood, old dust,

and something that sounded like life, even though there was none left. I sat down on an overturned crate, breathed in, breathed out, breathed again, and for the first time in weeks, I felt like I'd arrived somewhere—not because the place was good, but because it didn't demand anything of me.

I put down the bag, took the knife I always carried, and carved a stool from a piece of wood. It took time, but it felt good to do something without a goal. I built a small fire, found some dry wood in the corner, and soon the room smelled of smoke and warmth. I stretched out my legs and looked into the flames. There was nothing to think about, so I thought anyway.

I thought of the singer, of the old man in the village, of Kattegat. I thought of everything I'd done, and how at some point it had all become stories. Maybe that was always the point: that at some point you stop defending your own truth and just let it go, like smoke rising from a cold hut.

I found a piece of charcoal in the corner, black, brittle, perfect. I took it and began writing on the wall. No sentences, no names, just words that came to mind. Sea. Blood. Bones. Mother. Fire. Silence. I wrote until there was no more space. Then I put the charcoal away, looked at the wall, and laughed. It looked like the inside of my head. Messed up, raw, honest.

I stayed for three days. I slept on the ground, ate the bread I had left, and drank water from the river. I spoke to no one except myself. I was a poor conversationalist, but an attentive listener. At night, I heard the wind. Sometimes it sounded like voices. Maybe it was just my imagination. Maybe it was memory. But they weren't angry. They spoke calmly, almost kindly.

On the third day, I woke up early. Fog hung over the forest, and the river sounded different, as if it were hurrying. I stepped outside the hut, watched the light push through the gray, and I knew: I could stay here. I could grow old, be forgotten, die without anyone noticing. And that was precisely what didn't scare me.

I sat down on a rock, lit my pipe, and thought about what people would say about me if I really did disappear. They'd tell a few more stories, sing a few more songs, and then a new name would appear, a new king, a new Boneless. And someday I'd be nothing more than dust between two lines, a sentence in a book no one ever finishes. And I swore to myself that I wouldn't blame them.

I went back inside, looked at the wall with the words. I took a piece of wood and carved a final sentence into the middle. Not for others. Only for myself. "I was there." Nothing more. No name, no date. It was enough.

I sat back down by the fire, leaned my head against the wall, and closed my eyes. Outside, a bird called out, and it sounded like laughter. I grinned. Perhaps this was all that remains when legends lie: a few words on a wall, a fire slowly dying out, and a man finally sitting quietly, without having to explain himself.

I knew I would soon move on. Not because I had to, but because I could. And that was the difference. Before, I left to fight. Now I left to stay—within myself.

I lay down, pulled the blanket over me, the fire flickered a few more times, then it went dark. I heard my breathing, calm, steady. No sea, no war, no screams. Only the sound of a man finally stopping running.

I stayed until morning. The fire was out, leaving only a faint smell of smoke and something burning in the air. I sat there, legs stretched out, watching the light slowly seep through the cracks in the wall. The day smelled of wet wood and cold earth. I knew it was time to go. Not because something was calling me. But because nothing held me back anymore.

I took the bag, put the knife away, and walked out. The door closed behind me without me touching it. It sounded like a quiet goodbye. I didn't turn around. Some places you can't look at twice. Otherwise, they start to hold you back.

The forest was silent. No wind, no birds. Only the crunch of my footsteps on the frozen ground. I liked that sound. It reminded me that I still had weight, that I was still leaving traces, even if they would soon disappear. I headed east, simply because that's where the sun rose.

The land was empty. Fields lying fallow. Old fences, broken. A few crows accompanied me, as if they knew I had no destination. I spoke quietly to them. I said things like, "You're smarter than us because you don't want to own anything." One croaked as if she were laughing. I laughed back.

I thought of all the men I'd commanded. Some had believed I was invincible. Others had known that no one was. Now I thought it was never about winning. It was about going. On and on. As long as your legs could carry you. And when they wouldn't, you crawled. Not out of pride. Out of spite.

I came to a hill from which one could see far away. The land stretched out, gray and tired, but peaceful. No smoke, no war, no flags. I sat down in the grass. It

was damp, cold, and felt good. I took a sip of water, chewed on a piece of bread that was too hard to be called bread. It tasted of nothing, but that was okay.

I looked into the distance and thought that I was now free. Not the freedom they sing about in songs, not the big, shiny word. Rather the opposite. A quiet freedom. One that promises nothing, demands nothing. You wake up, you breathe, you walk. That's enough.

I wondered if freedom might be exactly that: finally stopping wanting something. I had wanted everything—power, fame, fear, love. Now I just wanted the sun to warm me. And it did. Not much, but enough.

I continued walking, slowly, step by step. I counted them, for no reason. After 100, I stopped. I didn't want any more numbers. No victories, no bodies, no proof. Just steps.

In the afternoon, I found a stream. I sat down on the bank and washed my face. The water was cold and clear, and when I looked into it, I hardly recognized myself. My beard had grown, my eyes were lighter, my skin was rough. I looked like a man starting over somewhere without realizing it. I liked the image.

I stayed there for a long time. I saw the wind making small waves. I heard the rippling, somewhere between song and silence. I thought: Maybe life never sang. Maybe it always just breathed, and we didn't listen.

As dawn broke, I stood up. I had no plan, no place, no direction. But I wanted to keep going. I felt the muscles, the scars, the weight. Everything was there, everything real. No gods, no myths. Only the man who remained when you subtract everything others had made of him.

I walked until the sky turned red. Then I stopped, looked west, where the sun was setting. I said quietly, "I'm still here." No pride, no sadness. Just a statement. Then I turned back east and walked.

And somewhere in between, between the last light and the first darkness, I felt that this was finally enough.

Night came slowly, the way tiredness comes when you stop trying to drive it away. I found a small depression between two rocks, gathered dry wood, and built a fire. It burned languidly, like me. The smoke rose narrowly into the sky, disappearing somewhere above me. I sat by it, legs stretched out, hands on my

knees, doing nothing. For the first time in a long time, doing nothing didn't feel like weakness. It was simple. Quiet. Real.

The fire crackled, sparks rose, and I watched them disappear. This is what memory looked like, I thought. Loud, bright, brief, and then gone. I picked up a stone, threw it into the fire, just to hear it hiss. It made a good sound, honest and final.

I leaned back and looked up at the sky. The stars were there, as always. They didn't care. No God, no sign, no judgment. Just light that had been traveling too long to mean anything anymore. I liked that. There was something comforting about the indifference. It was clear. It was fair.

I thought of all the talk about fate and fame, about men who believed they would become immortal if they died loudly enough. I had believed that, too. Now I knew that immortality was nothing more than a disease of those afraid of silence. I was no longer afraid. Not of silence, not of the night, not of the morning that might not come.

I pulled my coat tighter around me and took a sip of water. It was lukewarm, but it tasted better than any mead I'd ever drunk. It tasted of nothing. And nothing was good. Nothing was honest.

I thought about all the lies that had been told about me. About the ones I had told myself. And I had to laugh. Not because it was funny, but because it didn't matter anymore. Maybe that was the last freedom: knowing that nothing you were obligated anyone. That you could just go.

The fire shrank. I added a few more branches, watched them flare up, and said quietly, "I'm tired." Not a prayer, not a curse, just a statement. I heard the wind rustling through the grass, the sound of an animal calling somewhere, lonely but alive. I understood.

I looked into the embers. They weren't beautiful, they weren't bright, but they remained. They did what they were supposed to, without question. I thought: Maybe that was the point. Not to shine. To burn. As long as you can.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the stone behind me. The sky was open, the fire warm, the world silent. I said quietly, "The end isn't an end at all. It's just the moment when you stop explaining yourself." Then I exhaled. Deeply. Slowly. Contentedly.

I sat like that until the fire went out. No sound, no symbol, no applause. Only darkness. And peace.

The woman with the cold eyes

I arrived in a village that smelled of salt. It was by the sea, small, poor, and quiet. No laughter, no children. Just wind, waves, and the sound of doors that wouldn't close properly. I went three days without sleep, two without water. I went to the tavern because it was the only place where a fire was still burning. It was warm inside, but not friendly.

A few fishermen sat at the table, talking in voices that sounded disappointed. I ordered mead and drank it in one gulp. The innkeeper looked at me like a man you'd rather not ask where he came from. I liked that look. It was the look of those who have already seen too much to allow themselves any illusions.

I sat there, staring at the cup, thinking nothing. Then I saw her. She was sitting in the corner, alone, her face half in shadow. Her eyes were light, almost gray. Not cold in the cruel sense, but cold as stone, like truth. She didn't look away when I looked at her. Most people did. Not her.

I couldn't say why I stood up, but I did. I walked over to her and just sat down. She didn't say anything. Neither did I. We sat like that for a while, two strangers stealing each other's silence. Finally, she asked, "You've gone far." I nodded. "Too far."

She looked at my hands. "Fighter's hands," she said. I laughed softly. "Scrap metal." She gave a barely visible grin. "And yet you survived." "That was never the problem." "Then what?" "The after."

She looked at me. I could hardly bear that look. It wasn't curious, not covetous. It was the look of someone who's lost before and wants to know if you survived. I drank, slowly this time. "What's your name?" I asked. "I don't mention names," she said. "Then we're a good match."

Outside, the wind howled, the wood creaked, and I wondered why I stayed. Maybe because she didn't ask who I was. Maybe because she knew. Maybe because sometimes you need someone to look at you like you're not a ghost.

We talked little. She didn't ask anything, and I talked anyway. Not everything, but enough. I talked about the war, about Kattegat, about the snow turning red. She listened without judging. When I was finished, she said, "And what are you now?" I replied, "A man who tries to stop destroying things."

She nodded. "Then stay here tonight. Not out of pity. For peace." I said nothing. I looked at her, those eyes so clear they almost cut through me. I thought: If she were going to kill me, she'd do it without blinking. But she didn't. She stood up, walked to the door, looked around, and said, "Sometimes the dead are just tired." Then she walked out.

I stayed seated. I didn't know if she was talking about me. I drank the rest of the mead, stared into the fire, and for the first time in years, I didn't feel watched. Just seen.

I followed her shortly after she left the tavern. The wind was coming off the sea, harsh and salty, like a memory you'd long wanted to forget, until it found you again. I saw her standing down on the beach. She had pulled her coat over her shoulders and was looking out as if the water owed her something. I walked slowly, not out of fear, but because every movement seemed too loud that night.

"You're following me," she said without turning around. "Maybe," I said. "Or I'm just following the cold." She gave a barely visible smile. "Then you've found the right place." I stopped beside her. The sea was black, the sound steady, calm. Not a single wave caused a stir. I liked that. It reminded me of a time before everything became loud.

"You talk like you've left everything behind," she said. "I have," I replied. "Only the memories come with you." She looked at me, and there was that look again. No pity, no interest, just clarity. "And what do you do when they catch up with you?" I took a step closer. "I talk to them. Then they leave again."

She nodded slowly. "You're not who you were anymore." "Fortunately," I said. "Most people say that when they get older. With you, it sounds like escape." "It is." "From whom?" I looked out to sea. "From what remains when the noise is over."

She was silent. The wind grabbed her hair, tossed it across her face, and she let it happen. I looked at her. She was beautiful, but not young. Not in the way that dazzles you. Her beauty was old, honest, calm. Like water that knows what it has drowned.

"You know me," I finally said. She nodded. "Yes." "Since when?" "Since before you got lost." I grinned. "Then I guess you've never really met me." She replied, "I saw you when you still thought blood was a solution."

I looked at her, and for a moment everything was still. No wind, no sea, no thought. Just her. She stepped closer, almost standing in front of me. "You've stopped fighting," she said. "I'm still fighting, just differently." "Against what?" "Against the need to still be someone."

She looked into my eyes for a long time, without saying a word. Then she said, "This is the hardest war." "I'm slowly losing." "Then you've already won."

We stood there, two strangers who knew each other without having to explain ourselves. I didn't know what she wanted, and she didn't ask what I was looking for. Maybe this was what I'd needed all these years: someone who didn't want to save me.

The moon broke through the clouds, and the sea looked like a giant, sleeping wound. I thought: This is what peace looks like when you've searched for it too long. She turned to leave. "Stay here," she said. "Why?" "Because otherwise you'll be running again." I nodded. "Maybe running is the only thing I know how to do." She looked at me. "Then don't run away this time."

She walked up the dunes, slowly, as if she knew I would follow her. I paused briefly, looked at the sea, which offered no answers, then followed.

At the top of the slope, she stopped, looked at me, and said, "When you wake up tomorrow, you won't be the same. You can hate it or embrace it. Both are life." Then she walked on, into the darkness. I stayed there, watching her until she disappeared.

I stood there for a long time. The wind grew stronger, the sand bit my face. I felt the salt on my skin, the burning in my eyes, and it felt like cleansing. I thought: Maybe she's right. Maybe this is the beginning of something I can no longer destroy.

I went back, lay down in the sand, and looked up at the sky. No sleep, no thoughts. Just this feeling that something is ending without you noticing. And that that's a good thing.

I found a patch of dry beach, a few boards, and some grass. I built a small fire, just to block out the sound of the wind. The smoke drifted diagonally, the

flames trembled. I sat down, pulled my knees up, and looked into the light. It wasn't warm, but it was enough.

I thought of her. Of the look. Those eyes had promised nothing. No comfort, no love, no pity. Only truth. And that was exactly what stuck with me. I had spent my whole life among people who were either afraid of me or wanted to use me. But she was just there. And she saw me, as if that were enough.

I took a stick and poked at the fire, just to keep myself busy. I was bad at being still. I liked movement, noise, anything that proved I was alive. But now there was nothing but me, the fire, and the sea that could be heard in the distance. I thought: Maybe that's what you're left with if you fight too long—a pile of embers that no one needs anymore.

I drank the last of the water, wiped my mouth, and looked into the darkness. I wondered who she was. Not in name or stories, but inside. There was something about her that reminded me of her. The same calm that comes from wounds you no longer count. The same tiredness that doesn't yearn for sleep, but for an end.

I heard the sound of the sea, always the same, always honest. It made no promises. It took and gave back, without explanation. I thought that maybe she was like the sea. No answer, no goal, but real. Maybe that was what drew me to her—the honesty of the indifferent.

I took the knife from my belt and placed it beside me. I didn't need it, but I liked the look. It reminded me that I had never put it down, even when I had stopped fighting. Some things stick with you, even when you no longer need them.

I looked back into the fire. The light trembled over my hands, and I could count the scars, each one a story no one wants to hear anymore. I whispered, "She knows me." Not like you know a name. Like you recognize pain that has the same tone. I knew she'd seen me long before I even passed her.

I wondered if recognition was worse than forgetting. When someone really sees you, you see yourself too. That's dangerous. I've always been good at hiding—behind power, behind blood, behind rage. But she hadn't needed any of those layers. One look, and everything fell away.

I leaned back and looked up at the sky. No stars today, just gray. I said quietly, "You're worse than any war." I didn't mean it. It was a compliment. She had

opened something inside me that I had long since walled up. And now the wind blew through the cracks.

The fire shrank. I let it. I wanted to see it die out on its own. I liked that moment, just before something ends. There's always truth in it. No more resistance, no more pride. Only what is.

I thought of her words. "You are no longer who you were." Maybe that was true. Maybe now I was the one who finally understood that change is not loss. Only movement. I closed my eyes, heard the sea, the wind, the final crackle. I said, "I'm not afraid anymore." And that was the first time it was true.

I woke up because the wind had stopped. There was no more movement, no more rustling, only the faint crackling of the embers that were still there. The night was over without me noticing. I sat up, rubbing my face, the sand crunching between my fingers. The sky was gray, the sea flat, as if it had rested.

I saw her down on the bank. She was kneeling in the water, her pants pulled up to her knees, a knife in her hand. In front of her lay two fish, silver, dead. She cut calmly, precisely, as if it were some kind of prayer. I stood up and went down slowly. She didn't look up as I approached. "You sleep loudly," she said. I grinned. "You work early." "You get used to both."

I stopped and watched her. She was focused, every movement had meaning. No rush, no pride, just calm. I liked that. It was as if she were showing death every morning that she could still do it.

"You said you know me," I finally said. "I don't know you. I can read you." "And what does it say?" "It says: One who has survived too much to believe anything anymore." I nodded. "Sounds right." "And one who's still here." "That too."

She washed her hands in the sea; the water briefly turned dark, then clear. She stood up and wiped her forehead. "Why are you really here?" she asked. I looked at her. "Because I don't know where else to go." She nodded. "Then you're finally being honest."

We walked a bit along the beach. No words. The sand was wet, the salt clung to my boots. I felt my bones working against me, tired but faithful. She was beside me, quiet, safe. Sometimes that's enough. Just someone who doesn't talk.

"I watched you yesterday," she said after a while. "I know." "You talk to fire like it's your brother." I laughed. "Maybe that's it. At least it dies honestly." She

looked at me. "You're full of such statements. But you don't believe them."
"Yes, you do. Just not always."

She stopped and looked out at the waves. "I once knew someone like you."
"What happened to him?" "He stopped hoping. That calmed him down. And then he just didn't wake up."

I nodded and looked down at the floor. "Sounds peaceful." "Maybe it was. But he never said goodbye." "From whom?" "From himself."

I looked at her. Her eyes were cold, but not empty. Cold as a river in winter, not dead, just honest. She looked at me as if checking if I understood. I did. I understood too well.

"I don't want to fight anymore," I said. "Then don't do it." "That simple?" "All that remains is simple. Only we make it difficult."

We continued walking until the sun rose over the sea. A faint ray fell on her hands, which glistened with the salt. I thought I saw something like peace. No big deal, no thunder. Just that small moment in which everything fits.

"What's your name?" I asked again. She looked at me. "Names don't change anything." "I still want to ask you." "Then call me whatever you want." I thought for a moment. "Then you're a memory." She nodded. "Then be careful with me."

We stood there, two shadows in the light that was slowly growing stronger. I knew I would lose her, like I lost everything. But this time it was okay. Not because it didn't matter. But because she had shown me that losing isn't an end. Only movement.

I looked at her and smiled. "I'll stay one more day." "Then stay," she said. "But don't lie anymore, not even to yourself."

She left, and I watched her until she disappeared into the light. I stayed there, the wind returned, the sea roared again, and I thought: Maybe life is nothing more than this—someone comes, tells you the truth, and leaves again before you can forget it.

I sat down in the sand, picked up a stone, and threw it into the water. It barely made a sound. I liked that. No drama. Just a small circle that grew larger and then disappeared. Just right.

The morning turned into day without me noticing. The sun came out, but it barely warmed me. I was still sitting on the beach, my feet in the sand, the sea in front of me. She came back at some point, carrying a basket of shells and seaweed. She looked at me, said nothing, sat down, and began sorting. I helped her without being asked.

We didn't talk much. Words were too precious for that day. I handed her the bowls, and she placed them neatly on a stone. Her hands moved calmly, confidently, like someone who's seen it all and yet keeps going. I liked that.

"You were someone once," she said at one point. "I've been many." "And none of them were real?" "Maybe the one sitting here now." She nodded without looking up. "Then let him stay."

We gathered wood and built a fire. She cooked the mussels in an old pot, and the smell of salt and smoke hung in the air. I ate slowly, drank water, and for the first time in a long time, something simply tasted like itself. No blood, no iron, no intoxication. Just life.

She looked at me. "You look different." "Different in what way?" "Less vigilant." I grinned. "I have nothing left to guard." "Then be careful not to fall asleep." "Maybe that wouldn't be so bad." She laughed softly, a short, warm sound that said more than any conversation.

The afternoon came. We walked through the village, helping an old man repair a boat. She worked quietly, I held the wood, she hammered the nails. No orders, no hierarchy. Just two people doing what needed to be done. I thought: This is how life should always have been—not big, not loud, just real.

The villagers sometimes looked at us, but no one asked. Perhaps they knew the feeling of not wanting to explain things because otherwise they'll break. I liked these people. No one carried a sword. No one told stories. It was a place without myths. And for the first time, I didn't feel like a stranger.

That evening, we sat on the beach again. She had a blanket over her shoulders, I had the fire in front of me. The sky was clear, and the light softened. I said, "I never knew rest could be so difficult." She looked at me. "That's because you never stopped justifying yourself." "And now?" "Now you're just breathing."

I nodded, looking into the fire. "I thought I needed to fight to be alive." "You only need yourself." "And you?" "I've already found myself. I'm staying here." I looked at her. "You're waiting for something." "No. I'm alive."

We were silent. The wind died down, and the flames reflected in her eyes. I thought of all the battles, the blood, the noise, the men dying loudly. And then I looked at her sitting there, calm, quiet, and I understood that this required more courage than any war.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I said. "I know." "You won't object." "Why should I? Whatever comes, will come." "Will you forget me?" She shook her head. "You only forget what was never real."

I looked at her, wanted to say something, but didn't. She looked at me and understood without me having to explain. It wasn't a goodbye, nor a beginning. Just this moment, quiet, clear, unbroken.

I stayed until the fire went out. She had long since left without a word. I stayed behind, looked at the sea, and thought: Maybe that was love. Maybe just what love could have been if you didn't have to constantly prove it.

I lay down on the sand, the sea roared, the wind blew back. I closed my eyes and thought: One day. Sometimes that's all it takes to be human again.

I woke up as the light touched the tent wall. No wind, no sound, only the smell of cold smoke and the sea. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. She was gone. No trace, no goodbye, no note. Only the blanket, neatly folded, and the knife she had used yesterday lay next to the fire. Clean.

I sat there for a moment, waiting to see if she would come back. She didn't. I knew she wouldn't. Some people are like storms—they come, shake everything up, and when they leave, the air stands still. And that's the gift.

I stood up and stepped to the water. The sea was calm, almost smooth, with only the occasional small wave breaking. I looked at the line between the sky and the water. It looked like a wound that has healed but will never be forgotten. I thought: Perhaps this was her mark.

I walked a bit along the shore. I found prints in the sand, maybe theirs. Maybe mine from the day before. It didn't matter. Prints only mean something as long as someone wants to read them. I kept walking until they disappeared.

I thought of her, but not as someone you missed. More like a truth you briefly understood before it became too big again. She had taken nothing, given nothing. She had only seen me. And that was enough.

I sat down on a rock, looked out at the sea, and suddenly I started laughing. Quietly, honestly. I didn't know why. Maybe because sometimes life just forgets that it owes you a break, and you have to be the one to take it.

I saw her hands before me, calm, strong, secure. I remembered her words. "You only forget what was never real." I thought: Maybe that's true. Maybe I won't forget her because she wasn't a dream. Not a wish. Just an encounter that didn't want anything.

I sat there for a long time. The sun grew stronger, the water brighter. I thought about everything that had brought me here—the battles, the pain, the times I thought I had something to prove. Now there was nothing left. Just a man, a sea, and a memory, breathing quietly.

I took the knife she'd left behind. It was plain, worn, but sharp. No jewelry, no runes, no markings. I turned it in my hand, watched the light dance on it. I put it away. Not as a keepsake. As a tool. I liked things that simply do what they're meant to do.

I looked at the horizon. The day was young, and I had no plans. I stood up, brushed the sand off my legs, and walked. No direction, no destination. Just away from the sea, which knew everything.

After a few steps, I turned around again. The fire pit was empty, the water calm. I said quietly, "Thank you." That was all I could think of. Then I moved on.

The sun was now high, and the path was soft beneath my feet. I felt light. Not happy, not sad. Simply present. And that was enough. I had stopped searching for meaning. I was tired of having to explain things.

Perhaps that was exactly what she had taught me: that peace is not a state, but the end of the need to justify oneself. I smiled. I had lost a lot, but this time it wasn't a loss. There was space.

I continued walking, and with every step, it became quieter inside me. No voices, no names, no ghosts. Just footsteps. And somewhere, behind it all, the feeling that she had been right.

I walked all day. No destination, no reason, just walking. The path led me through forests, across fields, past small huts where no one lived anymore. I saw birds perched on old fences, cows staring at me as if I were a ghost. Maybe I was. One who's still here, even though his story has long since been told.

In the afternoon, I reached a river. Wide, calm, the water clear. I sat down on the bank, took off my boots, and dipped my feet in. Cold, but honest. I liked the feeling. It reminded me that I still felt something. I sat there for a while, listening to the water flowing past the stones, steady, patient. I thought: This is how one should live. On and on, without questions, without goals, just movement.

I took the knife she'd left there from my pocket. I saw my reflection in it. The blade was blunt around the edges, but it gleamed in the sun. For a moment, I thought I saw her eyes in that light. Gray, still, clear. I blinked; the image was gone, but the impression remained.

I looked into the water. My face was distorted, but recognizable. I looked old, but not broken. I looked like someone who had finally understood that you don't have to fight every pain. I saw the eyes. Mine. Hers. There was no difference. And I knew what that meant. She had never been a stranger. She was what I had pushed away for too long—life itself. Not as an adversary, not as a trial. As a reminder.

I laughed quietly. Not loudly, not forced. Just that short, honest laugh that bursts out when you realize you've been fighting yourself for far too long. I said quietly, "You were there to see me, not to stay." The wind didn't answer, but the water stirred slightly, as if nodding.

I leaned back and looked up at the sky. It was empty, cloudless, open. I thought that freedom was probably just that—having no answers and still moving on. I closed my eyes, listening to the water. It was rhythmic, calm, almost like breathing. I breathed along with it.

At some point, I fell asleep. No dreams, no images. Just peace. When I woke up, the sun was almost set. I got up, put my boots back on, took the knife, and put it away. I looked into the water once more, saw my face in it, and nodded. No words. No promises. Just acceptance.

I turned around and moved on. The river remained behind me, its sound fading. I thought of her, but not with longing. More with gratitude. Some people come so you can finally see yourself. Then they leave. And you stay.

Night fell, and I didn't light a fire. I wanted the darkness as it was. I lay down on the ground, looked up at the sky, and before I fell asleep, I said quietly, "I'm here. And that's enough."

The water rushed on somewhere out there, unstoppable, indifferent, alive. And I knew she was still there—not as a woman, not as a memory, but as a part of me.

Fever Dreams of a King

It started with the sun. It was too strong, too close, too real. I walked all day, not knowing where I was going. The land was open, dusty, dry. No shade, no voice, nothing. I felt the heat in my back, in my head, in my bones. My body made sounds I knew—the cracking, the pulling, the trembling. But this time it was different. Not pain. More like something was melting.

I stopped and drank from my bag. The water tasted of metal. I looked at my hands. They were shaking. I thought: Perhaps this is the price of rest—the body remembers, even when the mind has already given up. I continued walking, but the path became soft, as if the ground were breathing. The sky spun slightly. I laughed. A dry, burning laugh that immediately vanished into the air.

Then the fever came. First warm, then hot, then everything. I fell down, lay there, breathing shallowly. The ground was dry, but I sweated as if I were lying in the sea. I heard voices. Old voices. Too many. They came from the earth, from the air, from within myself. They were talking in a jumble: names, commands, screams, prayers. I recognized them all, but they sounded as if they were from another life. Maybe they were.

I turned onto my back, looked up at the sky. It was white, burning, empty. I blinked, and suddenly I was standing again. Not where I was, but somewhere else. Snow beneath my feet, blood on my hands. I saw men around me, warriors, my warriors. They looked at me, expectant, loyal. I heard my own command. "Forward." My voice was loud, sure, immortal. I knew this was a dream, but my heart believed it anyway.

I ran through the battlefield, smelled iron, heard the crunch of bones, the screaming, the dying. Everything came back, so real I could taste it. I saw myself fighting, furious, precise, cold. I was an animal. I was the king. I was what everyone had made me. And at the same time, the person I never wanted to be again.

I fell to the ground again, this time in a dream. Snow turned to sand, blood to sweat. I woke up, lying back where I was. The sky was blue again, the sun still. I

coughed, drank, and breathed. The fever remained. I thought: Maybe this isn't a dream. Maybe this is what happens when you live too long.

I tried to get up, halfway managed it, and fell back down. I laughed. "So this is what dying feels like." No fear. No drama. Just exhaustion. I closed my eyes, and there was someone again. I heard footsteps, saw a silhouette, indistinct, shimmering. A man, strong, proud, with a crown of blood. He looked like me, but younger. Without a doubt, without pain.

He stepped closer, smiling. "You've become weak," he said. "Perhaps," I replied. "But I'm still alive." "Living is not a victory." "But not a defeat either." He laughed. It was my laugh, only louder, crueler. "You've forgotten who you are." "No. I've finally stopped wanting to be someone."

It didn't disappear. It stayed. Like a shadow that doesn't know the light is long gone. I watched it go, and for the first time, I felt no need to defeat it. I left it there, in the middle of my head, among the sweat and dust. Maybe that's where it belonged.

I breathed heavily, felt the ground beneath me. Warm, soft, honest. I whispered, "I am no longer a king." Then it fell silent. The sun, the fever, the voices—everything slowly disappeared into a white noise. Only my breath remained.

I didn't know if I was sleeping or dying. It was the same feeling.

The fever pulled me in deeper than I wanted. I was somewhere between sand and snow, between fire and water, between what was and what never ended. I heard footsteps, saw shadows, and suddenly I was back – in Kattegat. The sky was gray, the sea black, and the ground smelled of death. I walked through the alleys, but no one saw me. People ran by, laughing, screaming, living. I was there and not there, like a ghost searching for itself.

Then I stood before myself. Younger, tougher, with that gaze that penetrated everything. The Ivar they had feared. The one who knew no mercy, no doubt. He wore the old coat I had long since lost. His face was clean, his gait sure. I looked at him and thought: I was never like that. But I was. I knew it.

He grinned. "You've changed." "That's the goal." "That's weakness." "That's peace."

"Peace is for the dead." I laughed. "Then I guess I've finally arrived."

He walked around me, slowly, like a wolf testing whether the animal in front of him still has bite. "You had power," he said. "You were afraid. And you used it." "I was hungry." "Hunger is good. Hunger keeps you alive." "No. Hunger eats you from the inside."

He stopped and looked at me. "And what are you now?" "A man who finally stops asking questions." He laughed loudly, brutally, genuinely. "You talk like someone who's apologizing." "No. Like someone who's finished."

He stepped closer, and I could see his face clearly. It was mine, only younger, untouched, merciless. I recognized the hatred in it, the pride, the fire. I also recognized the fear that I hadn't wanted to see at the time. I said quietly, "I loved you. But you almost killed me."

He shrugged. "Without me, you would never have become king." "And without you, I would never have become human." He snorted. "Human. A word for those too weak to be gods." "Or wise enough to stop trying."

He raised the sword he carried. I knew it. My old sword. I felt the fever rising again, hot, cutting. He held it to my throat. "Fight," he said. "No." "Coward." "Free."

We stood there, two men, two lives, two versions of me. I felt the weight of the blade, but no fear. I knew he couldn't kill me. I was him. And he was long dead.

I stepped back, looked him in the eyes. "You were important. But you're over." He stared at me. Then the sword fell to the ground, slowly, as if it had had enough. He turned, walked away, dissolved. No light, no smoke. Just silence.

I stood there, breathing heavily. The fever burned, but it felt clean. I knew I'd gotten rid of something. Maybe the king. Maybe just the need to be one. I sank to the ground, hands in the dirt, heart in my throat, and whispered, "I'm still here."

The earth felt cool. I heard the sea, somewhere far away. I didn't know if I was awake. It didn't matter. For the first time, I felt the voices grow quieter. Not because they were disappearing. But because they were finally listening to me.

I lay on the sand again, the sky spinning above me. The fever came in waves, hot, then cold, then nothing at all. I closed my eyes, and immediately I was somewhere else. A hut. Dark, warm, cramped. The smell of dried fish, wood, and that one scent I had never forgotten—her skin.

She sat there, as she always had, by the fire, her hair loose, her hands busy. Mother. I knew it wasn't real. I knew she was long dead. But the fever knew no bounds. It brought the dead back to life and made lies believable again. I stood there, barefoot, small, as before. And she looked at me.

"You're late," she said. "I'm lost." "You were always good at that."

I wanted to say something, but couldn't. My mouth was dry, my heart was loud. She looked older, but her eyes were the same. This calm, this knowledge I had never understood. I hated and loved her for it, sometimes in the same breath.

"You've changed," she said. "I had to." "No. You wanted to." "Does that make a difference?" "Only if you regret it."

I sat by the fire, just like before. I watched the light glide over her hands. The same hands that had carried me, beaten me, caressed me. I said quietly, "I hated you." "I know." "But not because I wanted to." "I know."

The fire crackled. I looked into it and recognized myself. The boy, the man, the cripple, the king—all at once. I felt tears, but I didn't let them flow. She saw it anyway. "You don't have to apologize," she said. "I made you this way. Strong enough to fall."

I laughed bitterly. "You taught me to fight. Not to love." "Because loving was never enough for you. You wanted possession." "I wanted to be seen." "You were always seen. You just never looked."

I looked at her. Her eyes were calm, almost friendly. No accusation, no pity. Just that old knowledge that hurt because it was true. "I missed you," I said. "I know. But you never looked for me." "I waged war to impress you." "And? Did it work?" "No." "Then you've learned enough."

She smiled, quietly, almost sadly. "Everything you did was love, Ivar. Just poorly disguised." "Love kills." "No. People kill. Love endures."

I looked into the fire, saw her silhouette blurred in it. "I'm tired." "Then rest." "I don't know how to do that." "Then learn it now."

She stood up, stepped to the fire, and the light slowly consumed her. I wanted to scream, but no sound came out. She looked back at me once and said, "You were never a monster. You were only my son." Then she was gone.

I was left alone with the sound of the fire fading until only ash remained. I raised my hand as if I could touch it, but there was nothing. Only warmth.

I opened my eyes again. I lay in the dirt, the sky red from the evening. My body burned, but my heart was still. I understood now that everything I had done—every rage, every murder, every scream—was an attempt to see her again. And now I had found her. Not in the world. In me.

I took a deep breath. It hurt, but it was a good pain. I whispered, "Thank you." Then everything went black. I fell back into the fever, but this time without fear.

I fell deeper than I thought. No light, no sound, just this feeling of falling without end. At some point, I touched solid ground, but it was soft, almost alive. I stood up, staggered, looked around. A gray field, endless. Fog, dust, shadows. All silent. Then I heard her. Footsteps. Heavy, many. I knew immediately who it was.

The men I had killed. Not as ghosts, not as horrors. Just as men. Dirty, bloody, real. Some I knew by name, others were just faces in the crowd. They stood around me, silent, observing. No hatred, no judgment. Just presence. I looked around, waiting for the verdict, but none came.

One stepped forward. A young man, barely twenty. I remembered. I had killed him in the snow, somewhere in the north; his blood had been warm in the cold. He looked at me, calm. "Why?" he asked. I searched for an answer, but found none. "Because I could," I said. He nodded. "Then you were honest."

Another came, older, bearded, with a scar above his eye. "You took my brother away from me." "I know." "Do you regret it?" "Sometimes." "That's enough."

I wanted to feel anger, remorse, something. But there was nothing. Only acceptance. They looked at me as if they knew this wasn't a fight. That this was just the moment when you meet yourself, without armor, without rank.

A small boy stepped forward. Maybe twelve. No sword, no wound. I didn't recognize him. "I am the one who was never born," he said. I didn't understand. "Your son," he said softly. "The one you never allowed." I stepped back. The pain came like a wave, hot and sudden. I looked at him, wanted to touch him, couldn't. "I'm sorry." "I know." "I was too proud." "I know." "I still loved you." "I know."

He smiled, and then he was gone. Just like that. No drama, no disappearance, just silence. I stood there, my knees weak, my heart pounding. I thought: Maybe this is hell. Not the fire, not the torment, but the reunion with everything you've repressed.

I sat down on the ground. The men stood still, a circle of shadows. I said quietly, "I did what I had to." One replied, "No. You did what you thought you had to do. That's different." I nodded. "Then at least it was real."

No one spoke anymore. They looked at me, and slowly, one by one, they left. No punishment, no forgiveness, no blessing. Just this slow disappearance, like fog consumed by the sun. I was left alone.

I looked at my hands. They were black with dirt, trembling, old. I wiped them on my shirt, but the dirt remained. I knew it was meant to be. Some stains aren't meant to disappear. They remind you that you've lived.

I looked into the void, heard footsteps again. I thought someone else was coming, but there was no one. Only the echo of my own. I grinned. "So it's my turn now." I started walking, without direction. The fog lifted, the ground brightened. I heard the sea again, far away. I said quietly, "You were all real. Thank you."

I knew the fever was slowly leaving me. My sweat was cold, my body tired. I fell down, lay on the floor, and closed my eyes. I was empty. But that was good.

I thought of all those faces. They were no longer enemies. They were witnesses. And maybe that was enough. Not mercy. Not punishment. Only balance.

I whispered, "I won't forget you." Then everything fell silent. No sky, no ground, no self. Only what remains when you stop defending yourself.

I woke up because the sun was shining in my face. No dream, no blood, no thunder. Just light. Simply light. I blinked; the grass was damp, and my hands were sticky with sweat. I turned on my side, coughed, and spat out dirt. The taste was bitter, but real. I was back.

I sat up slowly. My body felt borrowed, heavy and empty at the same time. I breathed deeply, hesitantly. It hurt, but it was that good pain that shows you've survived. I looked at my arms, at the skin red with fever. Not a dream, not a hallucination. Just the remnants of what had passed through me.

I knew it was over. Not life. Just the fighting. I looked up at the sky. No signs, no gods, no judgment. Just vastness. I thought: Maybe this is the reward—waking up without fear of someone calling you.

I stood up, swayed, and stopped. My legs held. I looked around. The same field, the same world, but it looked different. Clearer. Quieter. I heard birds. I hadn't heard them for days. Or maybe I just hadn't been listening.

I went to the river, knelt down, and dipped my hands into the water. Cold, clean. I washed my face and looked at my reflection. The same face, but something was missing. The hardness, perhaps. The look that had always been searching for the next fight. Now there was nothing left to look for. Only this moment.

I said quietly, "I don't hate myself anymore." The water didn't respond, but the silence felt different. Friendlier. I stayed like that for a long time, just squatting, the water on my fingers, my heart calm.

I thought of Mother, of the men, of myself. I had seen them all, every part, every fragment. And I hadn't defeated them, only accepted them. Perhaps that was the end of every battle—not victory, but cessation.

I saw the sun over the river, the light refracting on the surface, dancing. I didn't like the word, but it felt like peace. A peace that promised nothing, demanded nothing. That was simply there, like an animal that looks at you and moves on.

I lay down, arms behind my head, looking up at the sky. I didn't think about gods, not about glory, not about death. Only that I was breathing. I had forgotten how good that could be. Simply breathing.

I turned my head, saw the knife she'd left next to me. I picked it up, put it down again. I didn't need it. I didn't need anything. No crown, no name. I had my own breath, my body, my guilt, my peace. That was enough.

I closed my eyes. No dream came. Only darkness. But it was soft, not threatening. I smiled. For the first time, for no reason. Maybe what remained when you let go of everything wasn't a loss at all. Maybe it was liberation.

I whispered softly, more to myself than to anyone else: "I'm no longer a king. I'm just me. And that's enough."

Then everything fell silent. No pain, no voices, no memory. Only the steady sound of the river, the breathing of the world. I lay there, and the sun warmed my skin as if it had never forgotten me.

I woke up before the sun reached the horizon. The sky was still blue-gray, the light soft, almost timid. It was cool, but not cold. I sat up, stretched my legs, felt my muscles protest. A good sign. I was whole again. No fever dreams, no shadows, no voices. Only the chirping of birds and the gentle gurgling of the river.

I got up, went to the water, and washed my face. The reflection looked back at me—tired, but awake. No crown, no blood, no fire. Just a face that finally looked honest. I grinned briefly because I couldn't help it. It felt strange, that grin, but also right.

I took a few sips and gathered my things. Not much—a knife, a bag, a scrap of bread, the old piece of cloth I'd used as a blanket. I looked around. The place where I'd been lying was peaceful. No sign of struggle, no symbol, no monument. I liked it. A place that wanted nothing but to exist.

I set off, slowly, step by step. No destination. Just movement. I had stopped searching for direction. The land was vast, the world silent. The wind came from the east, smelling of grass and earth. I breathed deeply. It smelled of life.

I thought of Mother. Of the men, of the woman with the cold eyes. They were all inside me, like traces that couldn't be erased. But they didn't hurt anymore. They were part of me, like scars that you eventually simply accept because they belong to you. I said quietly, "I won't forget you."

The path led through a flat valley, then over a hill. I saw smoke in the distance, maybe a village, maybe just someone lighting a fire. Before, I would have considered whether to go, whether to fight, whether to take anything. Now I just wanted to see how the smoke moved. I liked the way it rose, thin and calm, as if it had no reason to belong to anyone.

I sat down on a rock and ate a piece of bread. It tasted dry, but good. I watched the sun rise, watched it turn the grass gold. I thought: So it's that simple. Life. No glory, no curse, no god. Just a day that begins because it can.

I laughed quietly. No reason, no joke. Just that laughter that comes out when you realize you've been taking everything too seriously for far too long. I

thought: Maybe that was always my fault. I wanted greatness where calm would have been enough.

I stood up again, dusted myself off. My legs felt light, my back straight. I continued walking, and every step was no longer a command, no goal, no escape. Just walking. I liked the feeling. No pain, no hurry. Just distance.

In the afternoon, I came to a tree, tall, old, and alone. I leaned against it and closed my eyes. The wind played in the leaves, and I heard the world breathing. I thought I'd never heard that before. The noise inside me had always been louder. Now it was gone.

I said quietly, "I am here." Not as a prayer, not as a vow. Just as a fact. The words hung in the air, weightless, peaceful.

I stayed under the tree for a while, then moved on. The sun was high, the land lay still before me. I didn't know where I was going, but for the first time, that didn't matter. I went because I wanted to, not because I had to.

And somewhere, deep inside me, I knew: This was the first day I was truly free.

I found the hut shortly before sunset. A simple wooden structure, half-collapsed, the roof covered in moss. No smoke, no sound. I pushed open the door, and it creaked softly. Inside, it was dusty but dry. A table, a stool, a stove that hadn't seen anything but dust and memories for a long time. I liked the place immediately.

I put down the bag and sat down. My body was tired, but not exhausted. Rather, peaceful. I felt the wood beneath my hands, cold, rough, real. I built a small fire in the stove, using only what was at hand—dry twigs, old boards. It took a while, but then it was burning. The smoke drifted through the cracks in the roof. I watched the flames move. I liked their pace. No rush, no destination. Just Being.

I ate the rest of the bread and drank the water I had fetched from the river. It tasted clean, like nothing. But nothing was enough now. I leaned back, breathed deeply, and looked into the small fire that colored my face orange. I thought of the nights I had dreamed of blood, of the noise, of the clanging of iron, of the taste of victory that had never satisfied me. Now there was silence. Only the crackling of the wood and my breathing.

I thought of her—the woman with the cold eyes. I saw her face before me, the expression that demanded nothing. I understood now what she meant. You

can't seek peace. You just have to stop standing in its way. I nodded into the darkness. Perhaps that was precisely why she had found me.

Outside, it became quiet. No wind, no animals, just the night enveloping everything. I stood up and stepped out the door. The sky was clear. Stars everywhere. I looked up, and for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel like they were looking at me. I was simply part of it. No king, no judgment. Just one of many lights that eventually go out without anyone noticing. And that was a good thing.

I sat down on the steps in front of the hut, staring into the darkness. The fire inside flickered through the cracks. I breathed slowly, evenly. The ground beneath me was solid, the sky vast, and between the two I was. No longer lost. No longer searching. Simply there.

I thought: Maybe this is the end. Not death, not salvation. Just this feeling of having arrived without anyone welcoming you. I liked that. It was honest.

I stayed seated until the stars moved, or at least that's how I felt. I said quietly, "I did it." No pride in my voice, no pathos. Just a statement. I looked at my hands, at the scars, and thought that they all tell stories, but none of them hurt.

At some point, I got up, went back to the hut, and lay down. The stove was still glowing, quietly, steadily. I heard the wood crackling, the wind, which was now picking up again. I pulled the blanket over myself, closed my eyes, and smiled. No dream came, no image. Only warmth.

I thought: Maybe what they call heaven isn't a place at all. Maybe it's just that moment when you no longer want anything, no longer need anything, and finally become still.

Then I fell asleep. And the night was good to me.

The Drinker and the Prophet

I arrived in the village on the third day. It lay between two hills, gray, quiet, as if forgotten. The houses were small, the roofs crooked, the smoke from the chimneys thin. No place for heroes, no place for stories. That was exactly what I liked. I was tired of big things.

People looked at me the way you look at someone who has come from far away and asks for nothing more. An old dog barked, then stopped. I went into the tavern. It smelled of beer, wood, and that sweet sweat that lingers when people live too long without moving. I sat down at the bar. The innkeeper said nothing. Neither did I. He put a mug in front of me, and I drank.

The beer was warm and bad. I liked it. It reminded me that not everything has to taste good to be real. I drank slowly, staring into the murky liquid as if it could tell me something. Then someone sat down next to me. Tall, bearded, old. His eyes were watery, but not empty. He had that face you only get when you've seen too much and forgotten too little.

"You look like someone who's lost something," he said. I grinned. "Everything." He laughed, short, dry. "Then you've come to the right place." He drank, for a long time, without blinking. Then he looked at me. "I know you." "I don't think so." "Yes, I do. Not by sight. From drinking."

I laughed. "Then we have the same religion." He nodded slowly. "I used to be a prophet." I looked at him. "And now?" "Now I'm drinking because no one's listening."

"Maybe because you said too much." "Or too little."

He put down the jug and leaned back. "People only believe what benefits them. I've learned that truth has no market value." "Then you've grown wiser." "No. Just older."

We were silent. The barman wiped the counter with a dirty cloth, as if trying to keep the dust moving. I ordered another beer. The Prophet did the same. We drank. No toast, no reason. Just drinking.

After a while, he said, "You know what's funny about prophets?" "What?" "They're never wrong. Only the timing is wrong." I grinned. "Or the world." "Or themselves."

He leaned closer. "I once said that a man would come who would conquer himself. No war, no sword, no glory. Just silence. Everyone laughed." I nodded. "Sounds like a boring king." "Or the first real one."

I didn't know if he meant me. I didn't want to know. I kept drinking. The sun was setting, the light becoming dirty, warm, familiar. He said, "They always think prophecies are promises. But they're just warnings." "And you?" "I never believed them." "Then you were the most honest prophet of all."

He grinned. "Honesty is a short-term approach." Then he drank the rest, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and looked at me. "And you, stranger? Do you still believe in gods?" I thought for a moment, took a sip, and said, "Only in those who leave me alone."

He laughed, loudly, honestly, with that tired joy that only comes from people who no longer have anything to prove. "Then maybe you're closer than you think."

We sat there, two men, two mugs, a night that slowly softened everything. No prophet, no king. Just two survivors who knew that truth is often simply what remains when the alcohol wears off.

We sat there after the sun had completely disappeared. The tavern was empty, the innkeeper half asleep behind his bar. Only the fire in the stove was still alive, and the flames moved languidly, like thoughts too tired to hurt anymore. The old man—the prophet who was no longer one—refilled his glass. I said nothing. I liked men who talk without speaking.

"Do you know what the worst thing about gods is?" he asked. "That they never pay?" He laughed, quietly but honestly. "That they're always right." I nodded. "Then they're not so different from us." "Yes, we are. We'll realize it eventually."

He took a deep drink and put the mug down. "I once believed in them. Truly. With bones, blood, everything. I sacrificed people, words, even my mind. And then I realized they never show themselves. Not because they can't. But because they don't have to. Gods thrive on distance. If you get too close, they lose their luster." I grinned. "Sounds like women." "Sounds like everything worshipped."

I drank along. The alcohol had that soft taste of wood and tiredness. I barely noticed it. Just that pleasant burning in your stomach that reminds you you still

have a body. "And what are you now?" I asked. "An old man who has stopped believing that meaning is necessary." "That sounds like freedom." "No. Like acceptance."

We were silent for a while. I looked into the flames. They had that trembling that looks like hesitation. I said, "I was once king." He looked at me. No surprise, no mockery. Just a slight nod. "And now you are?" "One who survived." "That's more than most can say."

He laughed again, and his laugh was scratchy, honest, and used. "I've seen many men die because of their legends. None came out well. You must have done the right thing."

"I didn't do anything. I just didn't die when I was supposed to." "That's often enough."

He leaned back, staring into the smoke. "I had visions once, you know? Big things. Fire, sky, voices. I thought I was the mouth of the gods. But in the end, it was just the alcohol. And a lack of sleep." I nodded. "Sometimes madness is just honesty no one wants to hear." "Or courage no one understands."

He looked at me, and his eyes were suddenly clear, almost young. "Do you know what I've learned? That guilt is the only god who never dies." I grinned. "Then I guess I'm his priest." "And I'm his fool."

We drank, slowly, in silence. The tavern was warm, but it must have been cold outside. I heard the wind at the door, the creaking wood, the distant howl of a dog. Everything sounded real. I liked that.

The prophet turned the jug in his hand and looked at me again. "You have something inside you that I know. This silence that isn't empty. That only comes when you've lost too much." "Or when you finally stop counting." He grinned. "Then you're almost there." "Where?" "Where there's no need for prophets anymore."

We sat there for a long time. Two men who wanted nothing but what they already had—a fire, a pitcher, and enough time to stop thinking about the day after tomorrow.

At one point he said quietly, "Do you know what the most beautiful thing about faith is?" "Tell me." "That you can lose it. Everything you can lose has never been God."

I nodded, took the last sip, and put the pitcher down. "I guess I found it."

The night was almost over when he began to stagger. We'd both drunk too much, but he looked worse. His head kept falling forward, then he straightened up, as if he wanted to say something else, but the words stuck. The innkeeper had long since disappeared, asleep somewhere in an adjoining room. Only us, the fire, and the sound of his breathing getting heavy.

"Slow, old man," I said, but he waved me off. "I'm not drinking. I'm breathing." "That's not breathing anymore." "Then it must be praying."

He laughed, but the sound was broken, like a branch in the frost. He reached for his mug, couldn't find it, and looked at me with those glassy eyes that suddenly became clear. "Do you know what the problem with prophets is?" "They talk too much?" "No. They think they're important."

I nodded. "And you?" "I'm tired of being important."

He coughed, a deep, dry cough. Blood came out, dark and thick. I pulled him off the stool slowly, put his arm over my shoulder, and led him outside. Outside, the air was cold, fresh, sober. The moon was low, the wind carried the scent of damp earth. I sat him against the wall next to the door.

"Better?" I asked. He smiled weakly. "Better than life." "That's no consolation." "Yes, it is. If you understand."

I sat down next to him. We said nothing for a while. Only the sound of breathing, the rustling of the trees, and somewhere the distant laughter of a drunk who thought the night belonged to him. The prophet looked up at the sky, blinking as if trying to read something among the stars.

"Do you see that?" "What?" "That up there. All those dots." "Yes." "I once thought they were eyes. Now I think they're holes." "Where?" "Out."

He coughed again and leaned his head against the wall. His body was heavy but calm. I knew what was coming. He knew it too. I wanted to say something, but he got there first. "I told you something today. About guilt." "Yes." "Forget it." "Why?" "Because guilt only applies to those who believe they could have been better." "And you?" "I was never better. I was just me."

I nodded, slowly. "Sometimes that's enough." "No," he said quietly, "but it stays."

He looked at me, and there was no trace of madness, nothing prophetic, no trace of divine arrogance. Just a tired human being. "You've ended the war

within you," he said. "Perhaps." "Then you're free." "Free from what?" "From the belief that freedom changes anything."

He laughed again, briefly and dryly. Then there was no more sound. His head sank forward. I held him until his body fell completely still. No grand gesture, no light, no thunder. Just silence.

I sat there until the sky brightened. The morning came slowly, gray, and unspectacular. I looked at his face. It was peaceful. He looked as if he had finally found an answer he liked.

I took his pitcher and placed it next to him, half full, as a sign that he wasn't drinking alone. Then I stood up, took a deep breath, and said quietly, "Peace, Prophet. Your work is done."

I walked through the village, slowly, tiredly, but clearly. The day was beginning behind me, and I knew I would keep going. Not because something drove me, but because it was the only thing I ever knew how to do—keep going.

The morning smelled of wet wood and ash. I got up early, before the village awoke. The sky was milky, the light still, like a breath no one dares to exhale. I went to the spot where the old prophet still sat. He was as I had left him—calm, unpretending, unafraid. The jug beside him was empty, the fire in the stove inside long gone out. I stopped and looked at him. No pity, no sadness. Only that understanding that comes when you know something has ended, as it should.

I knelt down and pushed his coat over his shoulders. Not because it changed anything. Just because it was right. Then I said quietly, "You were right. Freedom changes nothing. But it feels good." I stood up and looked up at the sky. No sign, no voice. Just this quiet wind blowing through the village as if it were taking the rest of him with it.

A few villagers came out of their huts, saw me, saw him. One of them asked, "Was he your friend?" I shook my head. "No. Just someone who knew when enough was enough." The man nodded slowly, as if he understood. Maybe he did. Maybe not. It didn't matter.

I went to the tavern and placed a few coins on the counter. The innkeeper looked at me. "For him," I said. The innkeeper nodded and took the money without question. I liked him for that. Some people understand things better when they aren't explained.

I set off, out of the village. The path was muddy with dew, and the heavens were slowly opening. I heard children's voices behind me, the clinking of buckets, normal life simply going on. No grave, no song, no farewell. Only what remains.

I thought of the old man. His words still hung in my head, like smoke that refuses to completely disappear. "Blame belongs to those who think they could have done better." I smiled. I had stopped wanting to be better.

I walked up the hill and turned around once. The village had become small, a few gray dots in the light. I raised my hand briefly. Not as a greeting. More as an acknowledgement. For him. For myself. For what had happened. Then I moved on.

The sun slowly came out. I felt it on the back of my neck, warm, calm. No triumph, no sign, no revelation. Just light. I thought: Maybe that's exactly what truth is—no answer, no promise. Just the moment when you stop, breathe, and realize you're no longer searching for anything.

I stopped for a moment and looked at my hands. They were steady. No shaking, no grasping for a weapon, no compulsion to hold on to anything. I liked the feeling. It was light. I laughed quietly, just like that.

I said quietly, almost in the wind, "Thank you, old man." Then I continued walking, up the narrow path until the village disappeared behind the hills. I felt no heaviness. No guilt. Only the weight of my own footstep, the honest measure that I was still there.

I stopped at the top and looked into the distance. Vast, endless, open. I thought, maybe there are no prophets at all. Just people who were right before anyone listened to them. And then I forgot about it again because it wasn't important.

I sat down on a rock, took a sip of water, and simply let the day come as it would. No goal, no meaning, no reason. Just life. And that was enough.

The path led me through flat fields blanketed in fog. The sun slowly fought its way through, weak but steady. I walked without haste. No destination, no weight on my shoulders. Only the earth beneath my feet, damp, honest, old.

I passed a few huts, scattered far and wide, little more than wooden boxes with smoke holes. People stood in front of them, simple, taciturn, engrossed in their work. A woman was drawing water from a well, an old man was chopping

wood, two children were chasing a chicken. No noise, no anger, no hurry. I stopped for a moment and watched them.

It was quiet, but not empty. The kind of silence that carries life within it. No death, no flight. Just existence. I liked that. I didn't recognize myself in them, but I didn't envy them either. They had something I had always sought but never understood: indifference to anything too big.

The woman glanced over at me briefly and nodded. No suspicion, no interest. Just recognition that someone was passing by who was just as human as she was. I nodded back. That was all it took.

I sat down on a stone and watched the old man continue splitting wood. Every movement was the same, calm, precise. No thought, no story. Just doing. I remembered that I used to want to smother everything in meaning. Every action had to mean something. Every blow, every breath, every gesture. Now I understood that life owes nothing. It's simply there, whether you want to interpret it or not.

A boy approached me, barefoot and curious. In his hand he held a stick that looked like a sword. He stopped and looked me over. "Are you a warrior?" he asked. I grinned. "I used to be."
"Did you win?" "I don't remember." He nodded seriously. "Then you're not bad." I laughed quietly. "Maybe."

He turned around, ran away again, and shouted something to his sister. I watched him go. For a moment, I thought he was right. Maybe strength isn't measured by victories, but by the ability to keep going, even when no one cares about what you've achieved anymore.

The woman at the well began to sing. Softly, without melody, just a humming that hung between the water and the air. I didn't understand the words, but I liked the sound. It was like the breathing of a place that wants nothing.

I stayed for a while, then I stood up. I had no reason to stay, but no reason to leave either. So I just left, because life doesn't need a destination to move on.

As I climbed the hill, I turned around once more. The small huts, the people, the smoke drifting into the sky—everything looked like a painting that no one had signed. I thought: Maybe this is true greatness. Doing things that no one sees and still carrying on.

I continued on. The wind grew stronger, carrying the scent of earth, fire, and bread. I took a deep breath. I no longer had a throne, no army, no future chasing me. Only this path, creating itself beneath my feet, anew with every step.

And there, in the midst of this nothingness, I felt light. Not happy. Not redeemed. Simply free from everything I once believed I had to be.

I said softly to the wind, "The Nameless are the strongest." Then I moved on, and the land breathed with me.

Towards evening, I came to a tavern. A small, rickety hut at the side of the road, with an old sign creaking in the wind. There was nothing on it, just a faded symbol that might once have been a sun or a coin. I opened the door. Warmth. The smell of meat, smoke, and beer. People, tired from the day, but content. I immediately liked how authentic it smelled.

I sat down at the table by the window, which was half in the shade. I wanted nothing more than peace and quiet. The proprietor, a man with a belly who had seen more than his face, came over. "What would you like?"

"Something warm." He nodded, brought bread, a bowl of stew, and a mug of beer. I ate slowly. No hunger, just this need to do something that wasn't thinking. The stew tasted of leeks, onions, and patience. I liked it.

Outside, the sun was setting. The light slanted through the window, dusty and golden. I leaned back, took a sip, and looked out at the street. Two children were playing with a stone, laughing, stumbling. A dog was sleeping in the corner. An old man was smoking a pipe, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling as if offended by gravity.

I sat there and thought: This is life. No glory, no prophecy, no goal. Just people who are tired but keep going. And I was one of them. Nothing more, nothing less.

The innkeeper came by again. "Traveler?" "Perhaps." "You look like you've been on the road for a while." "I lost count." He grinned. "Then you've arrived." "Where?" "Where you stop walking."

I laughed. A genuine laugh, ragged and short. He laughed with me, patted me on the shoulder, and moved on. I stayed seated, finished my drink, looked into the glass. No reflection, just darkness, which was calm. Before, that would have made me nervous. Now I liked it.

A few tables away, someone was singing softly. It wasn't a song I recognized. It was off-key, but honest. I thought that maybe beauty is just that: things that aren't perfect, but remain.

I looked out. The sky was almost black now. One star, maybe two. I breathed deeply. No pain, no burden. Just an empty feeling that no longer felt empty. I grinned. "So this is what loneliness feels like when it's no longer hungry," I said quietly.

I stayed seated until the innkeeper extinguished the candles. No goodbyes, no conversation. I put down a few coins, stood up, and went outside. The night was clear, the wind gentle. I looked up at the stars, nodding briefly, as if to old friends.

I didn't know where I was going, but that didn't bother me. Maybe that was the trick—not knowing, and still carrying on. I started walking, still hearing the laughter from the tavern, the crackling of the fire, the dog getting up, shaking itself, and lying down again.

I thought: Maybe loneliness isn't a punishment, but just what's left when you finally tolerate yourself. I smiled. That was enough.

I found a spot just outside the village. A small clearing, half-hidden among the trees. The ground was soft, the wind gentle, and somewhere in the distance a dog barked. I gathered wood and lit a fire. It took time, but I had time. I had nothing else but time.

The flames were small, calm, honest. I watched them dance, consuming everything I gave them, without greed, without pause. I liked that. Fire is the most honest stomach there is. It takes what you give and gives you warmth in return. No bargaining, no promises. Only compensation.

I sat down, legs stretched out, the fire before me, the night above me. The sky was clear, full of stars, so still you could almost hear them burning. I thought of the old prophet. Of his voice, rough and calm, of his last words. "Freedom changes nothing."

I smiled. Maybe he was right. Maybe it won't change anything. But it's healing. Not like a miracle, not quickly, not loudly. Just still, quietly, in time with my breathing. I felt my body tired, but light. No fear, no pressure. Just the quiet crackling of the fire and the wind moving through the trees like an old friend who doesn't need to speak to be understood.

I thought: Maybe I'm a prophet now, too. Just one who doesn't say anything anymore. The best truths are those you don't speak, because you know they're clearer in silence.

I looked into the fire and imagined the old man sitting there with his mug, grinning, half drunk, half enlightened. I said quietly, "You were right, old man. About almost everything. But you forgot one thing—sometimes it's enough to just stop lying."

The wind stirred the flames slightly, in response, perhaps just by chance. I grinned. "Yes," I said, "I know. You're laughing now."

I leaned back, propped myself up on my elbows, and looked up. The sky was vast, and I felt small, but not insignificant. Only right. As if I belonged right here, in this place, on this night, on this fire.

I grabbed a small branch, threw it into the fire, and said, "To you, Prophet. And to the silence you left me." Then I drank the last sip from my waterskin and lay down.

The warmth crept slowly through the floor, through my back, through my thoughts. I thought that perhaps every man ultimately becomes a silent prophet. Not for the world. Only for himself.

I closed my eyes, heard the crackling, the breathing of the night. And somewhere, very quietly, as if coming from far away, I heard him say again: "Honestly, it's a short time." I laughed, quietly, tiredly. "But really," I replied. Then I fell asleep.

The fire continued to burn, quietly, patiently, as if it knew that silence is sometimes the greatest prayer.

In the Halls of the Dead

I didn't know if I was sleeping or dying. It was that in-between state, where you're breathing but don't know if you're still doing it. Everything was silent, then came the smell. Smoke, metal, cold air. I knew it. It was the smell of battles, of iron and skin and everything that comes afterward, when no one is screaming anymore.

I opened my eyes, and there it was—the hall. Large, wide, endless. No roof, only shadows. The floor was earth and ash, the sky an endless fog. I heard voices. Deep, rough, familiar voices. Laughter, cursing, shouting. I slowly stood up. My legs held up, even though they felt like stone.

They sat at tables, countless men, warriors, with wounds on their faces, scars on their arms, cups in their hands. Some looked young, others old, but all wore the same expression: the calm of those who want nothing more. I walked through them, and they nodded at me. No cheers, no reverence. Just that simple acknowledgment, like among men who know that each has paid his price.

One raised his cup. "There he is, the Boneless One." I recognized the voice. Hvitserk. My brother. Younger, more alive, the way he was before it all became too much. I stopped. "I thought you were..." "Dead?" He grinned. "So am I. But this isn't the end, brother. This is what remains when you stop defending yourself."

He handed me a cup. I took it. The drink was cold, clear, bitter. I drank, and it tasted of metal and rain. I sat down. The others were talking, laughing, arguing, but everything sounded muffled, as if through water. I looked around. Faces from memories. Men I had led, men I had killed. All of them here, together, as if life had been just one long wager, and the stakes were finally on the table.

"Why am I here?" I asked. Hvitserk looked at me. "Because you deserve it." "Deserve it?" I laughed dryly. "I've shed more blood than rain." "That's exactly why."

Another person I didn't know leaned forward. "This isn't about guilt. Only about truth. Everyone sitting here has lost something they'll never find again. And every one of us was once you."

I looked at him, but he just grinned, drank, and wiped his mouth. I didn't understand, and maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe this wasn't a reward. Maybe this was just the place where you finally stop asking questions.

I saw my hands. No scars. No deformity. Smooth, steady, strong. I clenched them, felt power. No pain. No weight. I stood up, took a step back, and there it was—a huge fire pit, in the middle of the hall. Flames without smoke, bright, clear, endless. I felt no heat. Only this pulling in my chest, like a memory.

Hvitserk stood next to me. "Do you know what this is?" "No." "This is everything we were. Everything we wanted. Everything we lost."

I looked into the flames and thought I saw faces in them—mother, father, men, enemies, friends. All mixed up, blurred, fleeting. I thought, maybe this isn't Valhalla. Maybe this is simply what remains when you no longer have to explain to anyone why you became who you did.

I sat back down, took another sip, and the taste was different—less bitter, almost soft. I said, "I thought the gods were welcoming us here." Hvitserk laughed. "The gods? Brother, they don't come here. They're too afraid of what we know."

I grinned. "Then I like the place."

I stayed there, among them, and time lost its face. There were no hours, no morning, no night. Only the fire, the voices, and the sound of jugs hitting wood. I drank because that's where people drink. Not because I wanted to. The taste was always the same, but I liked it. It reminded me of life: bitter, but honest.

A man with a broken tooth and a scar across his forehead sat next to me. He looked at me and grinned. "I stabbed you in the stomach once," he said. "Then you didn't aim well." "Or you were too tough." We both laughed. No hatred, no argument. Just the laughter of two men who could finally admit that life was more than just winning.

On the other side sat someone I knew well—Halfdan. He looked younger than the last time I saw him, just before he fell. He toasted me. "You look better, brother." "Dead doesn't look bad on you either." He grinned broadly. "Here, we don't age. We don't rot. We're just slow to forget." "Forget what?" "Why we fought."

I looked at him, then at the fire. "So? Does it hurt?" "No. That's the strange thing. Nothing hurts anymore. And yet you don't forget. It's all still there, but it

doesn't cut anymore. Like a knife that's become blunt, but you still remember the blade."

He took a sip and looked into the flames. "We thought fame would last forever. That our names meant something. But here..." — he gestured around himself — "...no one calls you by your name. And that's the best part."

I nodded. I understood. I looked around. No heroic poses, no gods, no radiant faces. Just men who had finally stopped telling themselves stories. I felt something inside me release, quietly, almost imperceptibly, but finally.

Another, older, gray, with hands like roots, said, "Do you know what the best thing about death is?" I looked at him. "Tell me." "That you don't have to be right anymore."

I laughed, loudly, honestly. "Then I'm in the right place." "We all are," he said.

The fire crackled. One of them began to sing, quietly, without rhythm, without meaning. A song without words, more of a hum. Gradually, a few joined in, not beautiful, not ugly. Just real. I closed my eyes and listened. It sounded like what life might have been if no one had forced it into rules.

Hvitserk placed a hand on my shoulder. "You're still looking for something, Ivar." "I know." "You won't find it here." "I know." "Then wake up soon." I looked at him. "Do you want me to go?" He shook his head. "I want you to live. We're done here. You're not."

I looked into the fire, and for a moment I thought I saw faces moving within it. Men, women, children. Everything I had loved, lost, destroyed. I wanted to touch them, but couldn't. But I felt they no longer hurt me. They were simply there. Like scars that no longer itch.

"You know what this is, right?" Hvitserk asked quietly. "Tell me." "This isn't a Hall of the Dead. This is your head, brother. And we're what you'll finally see when you stop hating yourself."

I nodded. The fire flickered, and the smoke grew thicker. I heard the laughter, the clinking, the voices—but everything grew quieter, farther away. I knew I had to leave. That this wasn't my place. Not now. Not yet.

I stood up, drank the rest of my mug, and put it down. "See you sometime then." Hvitserk grinned. "If you come, bring beer. This tastes like memories."

I laughed, and the sound echoed through the hall, bright and short, like a last breath. Then everything went white.

I woke up with a jolt, as if someone had pulled me from a depth where no light could reach. Air in my lungs, fire in my chest. I gasped, grasping for the ground as if I needed to hold on to keep from falling back. The sky was gray, wet, real. No more sea of fog, no more hall, no more voices. Just rain.

He fell quietly, evenly. I lay in the mud, half under a tree. My hands were cold, my body heavy, but I felt him. Every bone, every scar, every tremor. I was back. Not as a hero. Not as a ghost. Just as a body that refused to disappear for good.

I sat up, breathed. The rain ran down my face, and I let it. It was as if the world were washing me without asking permission. I laughed, quietly, almost gratefully. I looked at my hands—dirty, bloody, real. Not like in the gym. Here, everything hurt. And that was good.

I felt my back, the pressure in my chest, the pulling in my legs. Pain, old friends. I'd missed them. I thought of Hvitserk. His laugh, his words. "That's your head, brother." I nodded. Maybe that was it. Maybe not. It didn't matter. It had felt real, and that was enough.

I slowly stood up, swaying, then stopped. The fire I'd lit the night before was out, just ash and a few smoldering remains. I stared into it, searching for something, not knowing what. Maybe reassurance. Maybe comfort. Nothing. Just black and smoke.

I took a few steps, my feet heavy, my breath shallow. The world smelled of wet earth and wood. No blood, no iron. Only life. I stopped and looked into the distance. The hills, the grass, the light—everything as always. Only I was different.

I felt empty, but not lost. More like a cup that finally has room to be refilled. I thought: Maybe what they call eternity isn't a place at all. Maybe it's just the feeling when you see everything you've been and still keep going.

I sat down on the ground and let the rain pour down on me. No resistance, no cursing. I had fought long enough against things that never ceased to be. Now I simply let them be.

I thought of all those I had seen. The dead. The brothers. The men I had killed, led, loved, lost. They were all still there, somewhere between thoughts and breaths. But they no longer demanded anything. They were silent. I liked that.

I said quietly, "I remember you. But you're no longer mine." The wind responded with a rustle. I took it as consent.

I stood up again, took a deep breath, and it hurt. But it was a good pain. An honest one. I grinned. I felt alive, in that raw, broken way that doesn't need beauty.

I looked up at the sky, at that gray, cold thing hanging above me, and said, "I am here." Not a request, not a prayer. Just a statement. The simplest and truest one there is.

Then I set off. No direction, no plan. Just onward. And somewhere behind me, far away, I thought I heard my brother's laughter once more. Briefly. Warm. Then just wind.

I smiled. That was enough.

I walked all day, without a destination, without a reason. Just the path and me. The rain eventually stopped, but the ground remained soft. Every step was a sound that reminded me I still had weight. I liked that. I liked the honest sound of life going on.

The air was clear, almost sweet. Crows flew above me, three, maybe four, slowly, with that weary wingbeat that no longer impresses any sky. I thought of them, my brothers, my men, those I had left behind and those who had deserted me. They were no longer heavy. I had once carried them inside me like stones in a pocket, too big to forget, too sharp to hold. Now they simply came with me. Not behind me. Not in front of me. Beside me.

I didn't talk to them, but I felt them. No whispers, no voices, just this feeling of presence that hangs between breaths. Before, I would have called it anxiety. Now it was peace.

I stopped by a stream, watched the water. It flowed, calm and clear, and I saw my face in it. Not young, not old, just real. I tapped my finger in the water, and the reflection broke. I grinned. "That's better," I said quietly. I didn't like reflections.

A little further on lay an old wagon, rotting, half buried in the grass. I sat on it and looked out at the landscape. Nothing special. Hills, trees, gray light. But I saw it differently. Before, everything had been a backdrop for battle, for power, for greatness. Now it was just there. Beautiful in its indifference.

I thought of the old prophet, his last words, the hall. Perhaps he was where I was now. Perhaps it was all one. Life, death, memory—different names for the same space.

I picked up a stone from the ground and threw it into the stream. It disappeared with a dull splash. I thought: That's how it is with people. You see them fall, you hear the impact, and then all that's left are circles that spread out until no one knows where they started.

I stood up again and continued walking. My pace was calm, even. No goal, no pressure. I had stopped telling myself stories. No legend, no king, no Boneless. Just a man who runs because he can.

I thought maybe that's the final lesson—not that you die, but that you live, for no reason, for no meaning, and yet you keep going.

Late in the afternoon, I found a tree, wide and old, with branches hanging down like arms. I sat down beneath it, leaning against the trunk. The wood was warm from the sun. I closed my eyes. I heard wind, water, a distant calling. No ghosts, no gods. Just the world.

I whispered, "I'm not alone. But I don't need anyone either." This wasn't loneliness. This was balance. I felt them there, my dead. Not as shadows. As part of the ground, the wind, the breath. They were everywhere. Me too.

I laughed quietly, more like an exhalation. I no longer had guilt. No fear. No questions. Just a body that had finally made peace with itself. I thought: Maybe this is all one can achieve. And that's enough.

I stayed there until the light softened. Then I stood up and moved on, slowly, step by step, accompanied by the silence that no longer felt empty.

The sun was almost gone when I saw him. An old man, alone by the fire, in the middle of a small clearing. No house, no animal, no cart. Just him, a pot, and this small, clean fire, burning quietly, as if it had never known haste. I stood still, said nothing. He saw me, nodded, as if he'd been expecting me. I walked over, slowly, and sat down at the other end of the fire. Not a word, not a question. That was good.

He had a face that looked like it was made of leather. Wrinkles like paths, eyes steady, hands steady. He stirred his pot, smelled it, took a spoon, tasted it. Then he held the pot out to me. "Beans." I nodded. "I'll take it." He grinned. "Of course you'll take it. No one says no when they're really alive."

I ate. Slowly, in silence. It was plain, but warm. The taste was nothing special, but it was honest. I liked it. The old man looked at me. "Where to?" he asked. "Forward." "Nice place." I grinned. "The only one left."

He laughed, that dry laugh of people who haven't expected anything for too long. Then he fell silent, looked into the fire. "You're one of those who saw something." "Maybe." "You look like someone who stopped looking." "Maybe I found it." "And what?" "Nothing." He nodded. "Then you've got it."

The fire crackled. The smoke drifted upward, carried by the wind. We both watched as if that were all that mattered. For a long while, we said nothing. No need to fill in the blanks. Then he asked, "Did you fight?" "Yes." "And?" "It didn't do any good." "It never does."

He looked at me with an expression that was more approving than pity. "I fought too. Back then. For land, for men, for a name no one knows anymore. I thought that was important. But all that remains is fire, beans, and the wind. And that's enough."

I nodded. "I was king. And now I'm not one anymore." "Then you're finally free." I grinned. "That's what the prophet said, too." "Prophet?" "One who was drunk and knew the truth." "Then he was a good prophet."

We fell silent again. I liked the guy. He didn't talk out of necessity. His words carried weight, not because they were wise, but because they were rare. I looked at him, the light of the fire on his face. "Why are you out here?" I asked. "Because no one talks here." "And that doesn't bother you?" "No. I'm old. Words don't bring warmth."

He looked at me for a while, then said, "But you. You still have a long way to go. I can see it in your eyes." "Way where?" "It doesn't matter. The main thing is to keep going."

I nodded, took the pot, ate the rest, and gave it back to him. He smiled. "Good eater. That's a good sign." "For what?" "That you're still alive."

The fire died down a bit, I added more wood. We watched the flames return, higher, brighter. I said, "I was in a hall full of dead people." He grinned. "And you came back. Then you understood something." "What?" "That peace isn't a place. Only the moment you stop fighting it."

I nodded. I knew he was right. I looked into the fire, and for the first time, I saw no face, no past. Only fire. Only life. I leaned back, took a deep breath, and said

quietly, "Perhaps that's enough." The old man nodded. "It's always enough if you don't want to measure it anymore."

We sat there until the sky turned black and the wind died down. Two men, two fires, a silence that spoke more than any prayer.

The night was soft, windless. The fire still glowed, faintly, like a heart beating tiredly but faithfully. The old man had fallen asleep, his back against a tree, his head slightly bowed. I stayed awake, staring into the embers. No thought, no purpose. Just that quiet burning that reminds you that time goes on even without you.

At some point, I lay down, my head resting on my arm. The sky was black, no moon, no stars. Only darkness, deep, complete. I closed my eyes, and sleep came, slowly, like an animal testing you before it lies down with you.

I dreamed of water. Endless water. No storm, no waves. Just the steady breathing of the sea, swallowing everything without destroying it. I stood on the shore, barefoot, the water cool, smooth, real. I looked out. No horizon. Only blue, fading into gray, so soft you couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

I heard no voices, no screams, no thunder. Only my own breathing and the distant, eternal lapping of the waves. I went in, step by step. The water grew deeper, colder, but it didn't hurt. It accepted me, silently, without question. I saw my reflection, briefly, then it broke apart, became the sea again. I liked that. I liked that nothing stayed put.

I continued walking until the water was up to my chest. I turned around and saw the land behind me. It had become small, almost gone. No fire, no people, no signs. Just vastness. I thought: Maybe this is heaven—not light, not glory, but space. Simply enough space to finally cease to be something.

I let myself drift, lying on my back. The water held me, carried me, effortlessly. I felt everything inside me quiet. No pain, no pride, no memories, just this weightlessness that was almost life, but better. I thought: This is what peace would taste like, if you could drink it.

Then I heard a voice, quiet, familiar. Hvitserk, somewhere in the distance. "You're here, brother." I smiled and turned around. "And you?" "I'm everywhere you're no longer fighting." I wanted to answer, but the words dissolved like salt in water. I understood him nonetheless.

I looked up into that nothingness that was greater than anything I had ever conquered. I said quietly, "I don't want to forget." The voice answered, "You don't have to. You just have to live without counting."

I nodded. The water took me deeper, but I wasn't afraid. I knew it wasn't drowning. Just resting. I closed my eyes. Everything was quiet, everything was good. No gods, no halls, no prophets. Just the sea.

When I woke up, it was still dark. The fire was almost out, the old man was still asleep. Above me, the wind rustled through the trees, like a distant breath. I smiled. I knew the sea was real, even if it only lay within me.

I stood up, added wood, and watched the flames grow. I said quietly, more to myself: "I've found it. Not glory. Not peace. Only silence. And it's mine."

Then I sat down again, my hands by the fire, and waited for morning. No dream remained, no image. Only this calm knowledge that I was finally no longer searching.

Morning came quietly. No birds, no wind, just the light gray that slowly covered everything. The old man woke first, rubbed his eyes, and yawned. He saw me sitting by the fire and nodded briefly. "You were awake?" "I slept where I needed to." He grinned. "Then it was a good sleep."

I nodded, looked into the fire. The embers were weak, but they lasted. I liked that. I'd grown to prefer things that endure quietly, without causing a stir, to those that burned blazingly. The old man stood up, stretched, picked up the pot, and went to the stream to clean it. I stayed seated, listening to the water trickling steadily.

He came back and sat down again. No hurry, no words. We both stared into the embers, and I knew that the silence between us meant more than any conversation. Two men who understood that words are only necessary when you still have to prove yourself.

After a while, he said, "Are you going?" "Yes." "Where to?" "Further." "Then I won't wish you anything. Wishes only make life impatient." I grinned. "That's the best wish I've ever received."

He laughed briefly, scratching his chin. "I liked you right away. You talk like you've stopped wanting to be heard." "I stopped trying to explain myself." "Then you've come a long way."

I stood up, dusting my hands off. The path lay open before me, a narrow trail through the meadow, damp with dew. I looked at him, the old man, staring into the fire again, calm, peaceful. I said, "Thank you for the beans." He grinned without looking up. "Thank you for the silence."

I set off. No goodbye, no greeting. I liked it that way. Some encounters need no end. They're like a breath—enough if it's there. I walked slowly, and behind me I heard the fire crackle once more, as if it were saying goodbye.

The sky was clear, the ground solid. I felt my footsteps, the ache in my legs, the tiredness in my chest, and I liked them. They reminded me that I was alive, and that that was enough.

I thought of all the places I would still go, all the faces that might still appear, and I knew they weren't ghosts anymore. Just people, like me. And that was enough.

I stopped briefly and looked out over the fields. Everything was quiet, everything was far away. No noise, no blood, no gods. Just the world. Simply there. I breathed deeply and smiled. I felt no guilt, no hunger for greatness, no anger. Only this calm harmony between me and everything that existed.

I said quietly, almost inaudibly, "I've become one of the quiet ones." Then I moved on. No goal, no pressure. Just the step, the next, and another.

And so Ivar the Boneless went on—not as a warrior, not as a king, not as a prophet. Only as a man who had learned to walk in peace with his shadows.

The Boneless Rides

I found the horse at the edge of a forest. Thin, with scars on its flanks, but its eyes clear. It stood there as if it had been waiting for me. No saddle, no bridle, just the animal, raw and real. I approached slowly, not saying a word. It smelled me, raised its head slightly, breathed as if testing me. Then it lowered its neck. I placed my hand on its mane. Warm. Alive. Not tamed, but not fearful either. Just right.

I mounted, without force, without power play. The horse moved slowly, as if it knew the way I didn't know. We rode through gray light, across fields, past trees clinging to life like dust. I had no destination. Just movement. After so

many years on foot, riding was almost foreign. But it felt good. Like a memory of freedom that was never completely forgotten.

The wind picked up, carrying the scent of earth, smoke, and people. I rode on until I heard voices—loud, raw, angry. Two men, maybe three. I pulled on the reins slightly and stopped. Between the trees, I saw them. A fight that was no longer one. One was already lying on the ground, his face bloody. The other stood over him, a stick in his hand, ready to deliver the final blow.

In the past, I would have intervened. In the past, I would have seen blood and known what to do. Now I remained silent. I saw the scene, the breath, the hatred so small it seemed almost ridiculous. People beating each other to feel themselves. I knew that. I was that.

I watched as the blow came, dull, ugly. The one on the ground groaned, the other screamed. Then there was silence. I waited until the scream faded. Then I urged the horse on. No intervention, no judgment. Just moving on.

The world doesn't need a judge, I thought. Just more people riding by without leaving a trail of fire. I was no longer someone who wanted to make changes. I was someone who understood that some fires only keep burning if you pay attention to them.

The horse trotted calmly, lightly, almost rhythmically. I placed my hand on its neck. "Good boy," I said softly. It snorted, as if it understood. We rode through a hollow, over an old wooden bridge, and the sky slowly darkened. Rain came. Lightly at first, then heavier. I pulled my coat tighter, then simply dropped it when the wind became too strong. I didn't need it. The rain felt good.

I thought of all the times I'd felt blood, warm, running over my hands. Now it was water. And that was better. I smiled. No triumph. Just that quiet victory that comes from stopping fighting back.

The horse continued on, and I let it lead. It knew the path better than I did. Perhaps that was enough sense—letting itself be carried, without control, without a destination. I liked the idea.

I looked ahead, over the hills, into the gray. No sun, no sign. Just expanse. I breathed deeply. I thought of what the prophet had said: "Freedom changes nothing." Maybe not. But it feels good.

I urged the horse on a bit, felt the wind in my face, the water on my skin. I laughed quietly. Not because it was funny. But because I finally understood that all that remains is what you leave alone.

And so I rode on. No destination. No name. Just dust beneath my hooves, wind, rain, and this thought that came and stayed: I have nothing left to prove.

The village lay in a hollow between two hills, small, poor, and crookedly built. I saw smoke from chimneys, heard the barking of dogs, the sound of hammers, the squeaking of an old cart. The rain had eased, but the ground was still soft. My horse entered slowly, cautiously, as if it knew that here eyes were sharper than knives.

The first people saw me when I reached the well. Women with shawls over their heads, children behind their legs. An old man mending a net raised his head briefly, looked at me, then away again. I knew that look. Distrust, mixed with that old instinct that says: If someone is quiet, they are more dangerous than someone who shouts.

I dismounted and tied the horse to a post. No one spoke to me. I walked to the tavern, which looked as if it had been built out of fatigue. The wood was gray, the windows blind. I opened the door and stepped inside. The smell of beer, smoke, and people keeping their worries drunk greeted me.

A few heads turned. A moment of silence, that brief pause that always occurs when strangers come in. I went to the bar and sat down. The barman looked at me, without greeting, without question. Just this waiting. I said, "Beer." He nodded, put one in front of me, and left again.

I drank. Slowly. Warm, bad, real. I liked it. I looked around. Men with narrow faces, hard hands, dull eyes. Farmers, fishermen, survivors. No one spoke, but I felt it. That whisper that needs no words. I heard my name. Quietly. "Ivar." Then again, somewhere else. "The Boneless One."

I didn't look, but I felt the room change. I took another sip and put the cup down. Before, I would have enjoyed it. Before, I would have wanted them to whisper, to tremble, to know who I was. Now my name sounded like it belonged to someone else.

The innkeeper came back and looked at me. "That's you, isn't it?" I shrugged. "Depends on who you mean." "The Boneless One. The one with the stories." I

grinned slightly. "Stories lie better than people." He nodded slowly. "Maybe. But they last longer."

He left again, and I stayed seated. I heard the conversations moving through the room, quiet, tentative. Not fear, more like uncertainty. I was no longer a threat. I was a memory, in the flesh. Something better left in songs.

A young man approached, barely twenty, with eyes that wanted to know more than was good for him. "Are you really him?" he asked. I looked at him. "Depends on who you want to be." He frowned. "I want to fight like you." I laughed softly. "Then you'll end up like me." He didn't understand. Young men never understand the end of their own stories.

I stood up and put down a few coins, enough for more than I'd drunk. The innkeeper looked up briefly and nodded. I went to the door. Outside, it was quiet again. The rain still hung in the air, heavy but not threatening. I untied the horse and mounted.

As I left the village square, I heard her whispering again. This time it sounded different. No longer like awe, more like uncertainty. My name, my shadow, my myth—all things that carried more weight than myself. I grinned. "Keep it," I said quietly. "It belongs to you more than it does to me."

I rode on. The village remained behind me, small, silent, swallowed by the rain. I felt light, almost empty, and that was good.

At some point I thought: Maybe this is the price of survival—you become history while you're still breathing. And no one notices that you've long since stopped telling it.

The rain eased, and the sky brightened, but without sun. I preferred this pale light, which makes everything look the same, to glare. I rode on, over wet ground, through narrow paths, past fields that still smelled of life. It was quiet. Only the sound of hooves, steady, patient, honest.

At some point I came to a crossroads. An old stone stood there, half-fallen, covered in moss. I stopped and dismounted. The stone was large, heavy, and roughly hewn. Ancient runes were inscribed on it. I ran my fingers over them, feeling the cold, the depth of the symbols. I couldn't read everything, but enough.

My name was there. Ivar. And beneath it, words I had never said. Words that sounded like both a prayer and a threat. *He rode without legs, but the earth*

trembled. His rage was the wind. His blood was steel. I grinned. "Nice nonsense," I said quietly.

I stopped in front of it, read it again. Someone had put me here. Not me, the man. Me, the legend. Me, the one they needed to paint their own fears on. I felt nothing about it. No pride, no anger. Only this quiet knowledge that stories take on a life of their own once you stop feeding them.

I thought of all those who had seen me. Those who had fought with me, feared me, cursed me. To them, I had never been a human being. Just a symbol, a sound, an echo. Now I stood there, before myself, carved in stone, and knew that I was finally free of it.

I sat down on the stone, took a sip of water, and let it run over my lips, cold and clear. I said, "If that's your God, then you finally have someone who's silent." I laughed quietly. Not mockery, just that small, honest laugh that comes when you see something that no longer concerns you.

A bird landed on the stone, pecked at the moss, and looked at me briefly. I asked it, "Do you believe all this?" He didn't answer. He didn't need gods, names, or runes. I envied him for that.

I placed my hand flat on the stone, feeling the coldness penetrating my skin. I thought: Maybe this is all that remains—cold marks someone leaves behind so that others believe it had meaning. And maybe that's not a bad thing. Maybe it's enough for them to believe, even if you no longer do.

I stood up and looked at the stone once more. The rain had turned back into fine drops. They ran over the runes, collecting in the notches, as if the sky were retroactively cleaning up history. I liked the image.

I said quietly, "Do what you want, Stone. I've done my part." Then I remounted and urged the horse on. It continued on without hesitation, as if it knew there was nothing more to be gained here.

The path curved west. The wind was blowing from the front. I rode into it, and behind me remained the stone, my name, my lie, my truth.

And somewhere in between, in the sound of the hooves, I thought: Maybe I was never as big as they said. But I was there. And sometimes that's enough to turn you to stone.

The day passed slowly, steadily, like a fed animal. I rode for hours, without direction, just by feel. The horse knew the rhythm, and I let it go. Towards evening, I came to a settlement. Or what used to be one. Only remains—a few walls, a well without water, wood that had rotted. No smoke, no sound. Only wind blowing through broken doors, as if checking if anyone was still there.

I dismounted and walked through the ruins. The ground was soft, overgrown with grass. Here and there, metal. Remains of swords, shields, half buried in the dirt, half forgotten. I picked one up, turning it over in my hand. Rust. No more shine, no weight. I dropped it. The impact was dull. I liked the sound. It sounded honest. Final.

I walked on, stepped over an old fireplace. Bones, black, broken. Human, perhaps. I didn't know. I didn't want to know. War leaves no faces, only shapes. I looked around. The sun was almost gone, the light flat, warm, tired. I liked how it made everything equal. Victory, defeat, glory—here, it was all earth.

I sat down on a fallen beam and looked into the distance. No more smell of blood, no more noise. Only this slow return of life that doesn't ask who owns the land. Grasses, birds, insects. All quiet and hardworking, like workers after a party no one could enjoy.

I thought of the halls of the dead, of the fire, of the men there. They should have been sitting here, I thought. Here, where everything is over. Here, where no one lies anymore because no one listens. I looked at my hands. No sword, no tools. Just hands. I liked that.

An old banner still hung on a post, half-torn, pale. No sign of it could be seen. I went over, took it down, and rolled it up. "You've seen enough," I said quietly, and threw it into the grass.

I lit a fire, small and sparing. The smoke rose straight up, as if in no hurry. I sat down beside it, toasted a piece of bread, ate, and drank water that tasted of iron. Clouds drifted above me, heavy and sluggish. I thought: Perhaps this is the most just state of affairs—when everything is equal again. When fame turns to dust and guilt to grass.

I stood up and walked through the shadows of the houses that were no longer houses. Everywhere, traces of people who had left because there was nothing left to take. A pot, a knife handle, a shoe without a sole. I touched nothing. It belonged to no one, so to everyone.

I stopped at a spot where the earth was darker. Perhaps a grave, perhaps fire. I knelt down and placed my hand on the ground. Warm. I said quietly, "I was one of you." Then I stayed that way until the light disappeared completely.

I didn't pray. I no longer knew any gods who could listen. I knew only earth. And it had always answered. Never with words, never with signs. Only with silence. And that was enough.

I went back to my fire and lay down beside it, my back against the horse. It was breathing calmly and evenly. I looked into the darkness, and there was nothing. No face, no dream. Only night.

I thought: War doesn't die with the last man. It dies when no one remembers anymore. I closed my eyes and hoped this place would finally be forgotten. Then I fell asleep.

I woke up early. The sky was still gray, and fog lay over the land. Thick, dense, almost alive. The fire had gone out, leaving only cold ash. I sat there for a while, watching the smoke from the evening mingle with the damp air. No sound, no wind. Just that steady breathing of the world, which you only hear when you yourself are still.

The horse stood a few meters away, grazing grass, calm, indifferent. I liked his manner. No thinking, no hesitation, just doing. I stood up, brushed the dirt off my hands, and stretched. My body felt old, but light. No pain, no pressure, just that honest tug in your muscles that tells you: You're still here.

I looked around. The ruins lay in the fog like ghosts, without terror, without meaning. Only forms, remnants, memories too tired to inspire fear anymore. I walked slowly through the place, treading carefully, as if I didn't want to disturb anyone who might still be sleeping there.

I found the old well, empty, dry, full of leaves. I looked into it, deep, black, silent. No echo. No sound. I thought: This is what peace sounds like. Like a well without water—not dead, just finished. I nodded. I could live with that.

I went back to the horse and placed my hand on its neck. Warm. Real. I said quietly, "We're going on." It raised its head, looked at me, and snorted. I grinned. "Yes, I know. Onward and on."

We rode off, slowly, through the fog. The ground was soft, the air damp, and everything sounded muffled. No birds, no people, just the faint sound of hooves. I liked that. I liked that no one could see where I was going.

After a while, the sun came out, weak, uncertain, a bright patch that barely warmed, but slowly broke the fog. I saw the land taking shape again. Hills, trees, a distant road. Everything ordinary. Everything good.

I thought: Maybe peace isn't a place. It's not a state. Maybe it's what remains when you no longer want to destroy anything. No victory, no loss. Just this simple will to stop hurting—not yourself, not others, not the world.

I took a deep breath. The air smelled of grass and ash. I felt calm. No hero, no ghost, no king. Just a man on a horse, leaving the fog without looking back.

I turned around anyway. Not out of melancholy, just out of habit. I saw the ruins, half in the light, half in the gray. They looked peaceful, like something that could finally be forgotten. I said quietly, "Stay where you are." Then I rode on.

The path led uphill. At the top, I paused briefly. Behind me was the old land, before me was the vastness. I smiled. I thought: Perhaps that's all that matters in the end—leaving the place of pain without cursing it.

I rode on, without a destination, without a map. The fog lifted. The sky was clear. I felt light, almost empty, but it was a good emptiness. A place where war no longer resided.

And as the sun slowly grew stronger, I thought: I'm no longer the Boneless One. I'm just Ivar. And that's enough.

The road was narrow, little more than a well-worn path, dry and dusty. The fog had completely cleared, and the day was clear, cool, and pleasant in that weary way that no longer promises anything. I rode slowly, letting the horse set the pace. It was quiet, only the wind stirred, light, with the scent of earth and straw.

After a while, I saw him. A man with a cart, pulled by an old mule. He walked alongside, thin, stooped, but with a gait that hadn't given up. The cart was full of pots, fabrics, and baskets. He saw me, stopped, and waited until I approached. No suspicion, no interest. Just that neutral gaze of people who have seen too many faces to still wonder.

"Morning," I said. "Morning," he replied. His voice was raspy but calm. I nodded at the carts. "A lot of stuff." "Few buyers." I grinned. "Sounds like an honest business." He shrugged. "It keeps me moving. Better than standing still."

I dismounted and approached. He showed me his wares, without advertising, without words. Pots, simple, clean. Fabric, coarse but sturdy. I picked up a mug, turned it, and checked the rim. "Well done," I said. "I have time. And nothing better to do."

I paid more than necessary. He looked at me. "Too much." "I like it when work pays off." He nodded, took the money, without thanks, without pride. Just as if there was no other purpose than to keep moving.

We stood still for a moment. The wind was blowing, carrying dust across the road. I asked, "Are you traveling far?" "I don't know. I'll walk until I can stay somewhere." "And?" "So far, nowhere has worked out." I grinned. "Then you're like me." He looked at me, briefly examining me. "Are you a warrior?" I hesitated. "I used to be." "And now?" "Now I ride." He nodded, as if that were answer enough.

He sat down on the cart, drank from a skin, and handed it to me. Water. Cool, clear. I drank, then handed it back. "What's your name?" he asked. I thought for a moment. "Ivar." He smiled slightly. "Nice name." "Do you think so?" "It sounds like someone who survived something." I laughed quietly. "More than was good." "Then you know how to live."

We both looked into the distance. Dust, sky, a crow somewhere on the edge. He said, "The weather's holding. No rain until tomorrow." I nodded. "Good." "Sometimes that's enough," he said. "When the sky just holds." "Yes," I said. "Sometimes that's enough."

I helped him push the cart again. The mule pulled, he walked alongside, and I paused briefly. "Goodbye, merchant." He didn't look back. "You too, rider."

I watched him disappear into the dust. No myth, no fate, no sign. Just two people who happened to exist at the same moment.

I remounted and rode on. I thought: Maybe this is true peace—when you talk to someone without fighting, without preaching, and just keep going, without missing anything.

The sky remained clear. The horse walked calmly. I felt light. I looked up and said quietly, "Hold on, heaven. Just a little longer."

And he held.

Evening came quietly. No wind, no noise, just that slow fall of light that softens the world. I followed a path that ran between two hills until I heard the sound of a river. Wide, calm, shallow enough to ford, deep enough to reflect you. I stopped, dismounted, and led the horse to the bank.

The water was clear, cool, and moved steadily, as if it had forgotten all sense of haste. I knelt down and dipped my hands into it. The pain of the cold was genuine. I scooped up water and drank. Then I let the horse drink. It lowered its head and snorted softly. I watched it. It drank as if it were the only meaningful task. I envied it for that.

I looked into the water, and there was my face. Older, calmer, emptier. Not that of a king, not that of a warrior. Just that of a man who had finally seen everything he needed to see. I looked at the wrinkles, the lines, the shadows under my eyes. Once, I would have despised them. Now I liked them. They spoke without lying.

I said quietly, "You're still here." My reflection didn't respond. It didn't need to. I knew what it would say: That sometimes being is enough. That surviving is no shame. That silence can be louder than glory.

I took a handful of water and washed my face. It burned briefly, coldly, but good. I felt awake, clean, real. I sat down on the bank and watched the sky reflected in the river. Colors mingled—gray, gold, blue. Everything flowing, everything without boundaries. I thought: This is what life should be like. Not orderly, not fair, just flowing.

I looked at my hands. They trembled slightly. Age, tiredness, peace—all the same. I placed them on the earth. The ground was moist, firm. I liked the feeling. I said quietly, "This is what I was looking for." No goal, no victory, no God. Only this moment, where nothing is missing.

The horse raised its head and looked at me. I grinned. "We'll stay a little longer, huh?" It approached and settled down, its head bowed as if it were asleep. I leaned back, my shoulders against a rock. The water continued to flow without stopping. I heard it, breathing in time.

Somewhere in the distance, a bird called, short, solitary, beautiful. I smiled. I thought: Maybe that's the difference. I used to want the world to hear me. Now, hearing it is enough for me.

I took a small stone and threw it into the water. The ripples spread and disappeared. My reflection returned, slightly distorted, but still there. I nodded to it. Not a goodbye, not a greeting. Just recognition.

The sun set. I sat until the light had completely disappeared. No fire, no words. Just water, earth, sky, and me. Three things that have never fought for power.

As it grew dark, I said quietly, "I'm not fighting anymore." The river responded with a steady murmur, like a breath. I took it as consent.

I leaned back, closed my eyes, and let the evening pass. No dreams came, no memories. Only silence. Real, heavy, pure silence.

And somewhere far away, the world laughed briefly, as if it had understood that one of its warriors had finally come home—not to the halls of the dead, but to the peace that no god can promise.

The Wrath of the Lame

I set off at dawn. The river was calm, the water still cold as I drank it one last time. The horse snorted impatiently, as if it knew something was about to happen. I felt it too. Not fear, not foreboding. Just that faint trembling in my stomach that says: Peace has its price, and it's about to be paid.

The sky was clear, a pale blue that held no promise. I followed the path that ran between rocks, an old trade route, half-overgrown, forgotten. The ground was hard, the stones smooth from the rain. I rode slowly, my thoughts heavier than the horse. I wondered how long one can maintain peace before the world calls again.

After a few hours, I saw smoke. Thin, gray, quiet. No village, just a camp. Three men, a wagon, two horses. I kept my distance, watched. They didn't look like traders. Too clean for farmers, too nervous for soldiers. One saw me, pointed, the second reached for his sword. The third stood up, shouted: "Stop!"

I stayed seated. Not a word. They approached, slowly, suspiciously. I saw their faces. Young, with that mixture of hunger and fear that turns men into wolves. The first said, "Nice steed." I nodded. "He thinks the same of me." They didn't laugh. The second approached. "Pay for the journey." "I didn't know he was yours." "Now you know."

I looked into the first one's eyes. There was nothing there, only greed mixed with boredom. I had led men like that before. Now I saw them and felt nothing. No anger, no superiority. Only this faint regret that they were still stuck in the game I had long since lost.

"I don't have anything you want," I said calmly. "We'll see for ourselves." The second one stepped forward, grabbed the bridle. I let him. The horse snorted, restless. I felt the old instinct twitch within me. The movement, the warmth, the impulse to stand up, to strike before the thought even arises. I knew the trembling, the tingling under my skin. The anger. My old friend.

I took a deep breath, letting him come. Then I let him go. I looked at the man, saw his fingers trembling, not from cold, but from uncertainty. I said, "Let go. The horse doesn't like it." He gave a short, nervous laugh. "Or what?" I looked into his eyes, calm, unmoving. "Or you'll learn what it's like when you have nothing left to lose."

Something in my voice was enough. He stepped back, just a step, but enough. The first one cursed and stepped forward, wanting to show courage. I said quietly, "There are two ways of living. Those who want to prove they're strong, and those who no longer have to." He didn't understand. Of course not. But something in my tone made him pause. Maybe because he realized I wasn't afraid. Maybe because I had no intention of hurting him. Men sense that, and it confuses them more than violence.

I turned the horse slightly, without haste. "Keep your way," I said. "I don't need it." Then I rode on. No triumph, no struggle, no victory. Just the faint feeling that I had accomplished something without fighting.

Someone behind me shouted, "Coward!" I grinned. I'd heard the word so many times that it had lost its sharpness. It sounded almost friendly now. I said quietly, without turning around, "Maybe. But I'm alive."

The wind took the rest. I rode on. The horse snorted as if it understood. I patted its neck. "We'll let them play," I said. It responded with a soft snort. I liked that.

The path led downhill again, and I felt my heart calm down. I thought: Perhaps this is true anger—not the kind that burns, but the kind that no longer burns, even though it could.

The rain came just before dusk. First a few drops, then steady, hard, persistent. I found a hut, half-ruined, half-usable. The roof held, the door hung crooked, but it closed. I tied the horse under a porch, threw him some hay I'd picked up along the way. Then I went inside.

Inside, it smelled of old wood, dust, and the remnants of people who had once lived here. A bench, a table, a cold stove. I sat down, placed my hands on my knees, and listened to the rain. This monotonous drumming that makes everything the same—day, night, memory. I liked the sound. It said: You are small, and that's a good thing.

I thought of the three men today. Their laughter, their trembling, their hunger. In the past, I would have killed them, out of principle, out of reflex, out of boredom. Now I had let them go. And they had let me go too. No blood, no triumph. Just distance. I wondered if that was weakness or strength. Then I laughed quietly, because I realized the question didn't need an answer.

I took the waterskin and took a sip. Cold. Real. I liked the taste. It reminded me of everything simple. I looked out the small window, which barely had any glass left. The rain fell thickly, like a gray wall. Outside, no movement, no people, no world. Just water. Everything was being washed, without intention, without meaning.

I thought about the past, about all the times I'd thought I was in control. Anger had made me strong, given me direction. I'd used it like a tool, like a torch. And every time, all that had remained in the end was ash. I understood now: Anger had never been my strength. Only my training wheel.

I put my feet up and leaned against the wall. The rain grew louder. I closed my eyes and listened. I felt a residue still vibrating inside me—that old trembling that wouldn't go away. But it was weaker. No more fire, just embers. I left it there. You can't kill anger, you can only stop feeding it.

I thought: Perhaps what they call peace is not the absence of war, but the acceptance that the war remains within you, but that you no longer give it commands.

I laughed, short, dry. I knew no king, no god, no scribe would write that down. No song is sung about the man who chooses not to strike. But maybe, I thought, maybe that's exactly the beginning of truth.

I stood up, went to the door, and opened it. The rain fell slanting, hard, but I stepped out. I let it hit my face, cold, honest. I stretched out my arms, felt the dirt run off, the tiredness flowing with it. I said quietly, "I felt you, old friend. But I didn't follow you this time."

The wind took the words from me, carried them somewhere. I knew the anger would return. It never completely goes away. But next time, I would recognize it—and perhaps let it stand again.

I went back to the hut and sat down on the ground, which smelled of rain. I felt calm. Not better, not worse. Just calm.

The rain continued all night. I listened as he erased stories, one by one.

The morning came without color. Only that soft gray that makes things the same. I opened the door of the hut and stepped outside. The ground was steaming, damp, alive. Everything smelled of earth and new beginnings. The rain had washed the world, not made it beautiful, but honest. And that was enough.

The horse stood there quietly, eating. Its coat glistened in the wet light. I went to it and placed my hand on its neck. Warm, calm, real. I liked how it was simply there, without wanting anything. I thought: Maybe that's the difference between us and them – animals only fight when they have to. Humans fight because they don't know who they are otherwise.

I took a deep breath. The air was heavy but clean. No smoke, no sweat, no iron. Just grass, water, wood. I looked around. The world was the same, but it felt different. Maybe because I saw it differently. The rain hadn't changed anything, except my vision.

I went to the stream that flowed nearby, knelt down, and washed my face. The water was cold, but it woke me up. I saw my reflection. It wasn't the same look as yesterday. Less harshness. More emptiness. But a good emptiness, one with room.

I sat down on the bank and watched the water. It flowed as if it knew it didn't need a direction to arrive. I thought: This is how one should live. Just keep flowing, without a destination, without justification. Just being there until the movement stops of its own accord.

I stayed there for a while. I was in no hurry, without any tasks. In the past, that would have driven me crazy. Emptiness meant danger. Today, it felt like

freedom. Perhaps, I thought, this was the ultimate maturity—finding peace without forcing it.

A bird came and perched on a branch above me, shaking its wings, dropping drops. One hit my forehead. I laughed softly. So quietly, it was almost like breathing.

I remembered the rain at night, the sound, my words. *I felt you, old friend.* I still felt it. The anger. It was there, like a scar that doesn't heal, but doesn't hurt anymore either. I smiled. I knew it would stay. But this time I was stronger than him, because I didn't need him anymore.

I stood up and looked at the sky. It had become clearer, a pale blue that grew brighter in the distance. I thought: Maybe what they call peace isn't a gift at all. Maybe it's just what's left when you stop destroying something.

I went back to the hut and saddled the horse. It turned its head and looked at me. I grinned. "Yes, we'll keep going. But slowly." I mounted, letting it go step by step. No hurry, no destination. Just movement.

The path was muddy, but that didn't bother me. I liked the sound of the hooves, the gentle sinking, the rhythmic clapping. It sounded like life, not flight.

I looked back at the hut once more. A simple, gray shape in the fog. A place that had welcomed me without asking. I nodded to it. Not a farewell, just recognition.

I rode on through the damp morning, and the sun slowly came out, pale, timid, almost shy. I thought: Maybe this is the best thing that can happen to a person—to wake up and not want anything. Just to be.

Towards midday, it grew warmer. The sky was clear, the light mild, soft, like an old friend who recognizes you. I rode slowly, letting the horse find its pace. The path led through a flat valley, past fields no longer cultivated. Just tall grass, a few goats roaming freely.

Then I saw them. A woman, barefoot, holding a child by the hand. The girl could have been barely six, thin, with eyes too big for her face. They saw me first and stopped. Not afraid, but cautious. That kind of silence people have when they've survived alone for too long.

I stopped, dismounted, and left the horse standing. The woman said nothing. Neither did I. We just looked at each other for a moment. Then I pointed at the

girl. "Hungry?" She nodded, barely visible. I reached into my bag and pulled out a piece of bread I still had. Hard, dry, but better than nothing. I handed it to her. She took it, carefully, like someone who doesn't believe things come without a price.

The girl looked at me, holding the bread, but not eating. I knelt down and looked into her eyes. "Eat," I said quietly. "It's yours." She hesitated briefly, then took a bite. Small, timid, as if she had to remember how to eat. I watched her. No pity, no pathos. Just observation. Life, breathing.

The woman said, "You're not a merchant." "No." "Warrior?" I grinned. "Not anymore." She nodded, looking past me. "We have nothing you can take." "I don't want anything." She looked at me as if she didn't want to believe me. "No one wants anything." "Yes, they do. Some have finally had enough."

I grabbed my canteen and gave it to her. She drank, then gave it to the child. The girl drank too quickly, coughed, and laughed. The laughter was weak, but genuine. I liked the sound. I said, "Are you alone?" "Yes." "Where to?" "Somewhere where you won't be cold anymore." I nodded. "That's a good plan."

I went to my horse, untied the small bag of dried meat I still had, and brought it to her. "Share this. Slowly." She took it, hesitantly. "Why?" I shrugged. "Because I can." She looked at me, long, searching. Then she said quietly, "You look like someone who was once evil." I grinned. "I was." "And now?" "Now I'm tired."

She nodded, and I knew she understood. Fatigue was a language spoken by everyone who had fought too long.

The girl came closer and held out the bread she hadn't eaten. "For you," she said.

I shook my head. "I already have." She smiled. It was crooked, toothless, but more beautiful than any prayer.

I climbed back on. The woman said, "What's your name?" I thought for a moment. "Ivar." She nodded, said, "Good name. Sounds like he carried a lot." "He did." She looked up at the sky. "Then let him rest."

I smiled and gently urged the horse on. The girl waved, small and serious. I raised my hand. No grand gesture. Just a greeting between two living beings who, for a moment, breathed the same wind.

As I rode on, I turned around. They were going the other way. Slowly, but straight. I watched them until they disappeared into the light. Then I rode on.

I thought, maybe this is the real victory—not getting stronger, but stopping hurting others, even when you could.

The wind grew warmer. The day smelled of dust and bread. I smiled. For the first time, not out of defiance, but out of calm.

The day passed slowly. The sun was low, the light becoming soft, golden, ancient. I rode on, my head slightly bowed, my hands loose on the reins. No destination, no hurry. Just this simple will to go a little further before night falls. The wind was warm, carrying the scent of fire, bread, voices. I saw the smoke first. Then the roofs. A village.

I stopped, on a small hill. From up here, I could see everything. Small houses, people, movement. Children running, women carrying baskets, somewhere someone chopping wood. And laughter. That genuine, carefree laughter I hadn't heard in so long that it seemed strange to me. I sat there and listened, even though the wind swallowed half of it.

A part of me wanted to go there. Just for a moment. A fire, a cup, a table. A roof that offered not only shelter, but companionship. I could imagine it. I had liked it before—the sound of life around me. The conversations, the heat, the laughter. I had been human before I became history.

I saw the lights growing stronger, how evening swallowed the village, leaving only the fire. I thought: Perhaps this was the moment to return. To sit down, talk, live like everyone else. No myth, no shadow. Only Ivar.

I laughed quietly. The thought was comforting, but it didn't last. I knew I wouldn't stay there. I'd been out too long, alone too long. People talk because they need to forget. I had learned to remember without words.

I stayed on the hill, watching them share life, and I felt no envy. Only this quiet knowledge that I no longer needed to belong to be complete. I thought: Some find peace in the fire. Others on its edge.

The horse kicked restlessly, as if asking why we weren't moving on. I patted his neck. "Because we've already had it," I said quietly. "Everything that's down there. We've had it. And it was enough."

I sat there until the lights faded. Until only the distant glow remained, fading into the night like a memory. Then I turned away, riding into the darkness. No goodbye, no looking back. Only the soft sound of hooves, the horse's breathing, and the feeling that sometimes staying away is more honest than arriving.

I thought of the girl, the woman, the rain, the anger that never came. I thought of the stone with my name on it, the runes, the sea. All part of the same story. One that now ended quietly, not with a scream, but with a nod.

The sky above me was clear, full of stars. I looked up and said quietly, "I'm here, but I don't have to be there."

Then I rode on, into the nothingness that was finally no longer an enemy.

Night came, clear and silent. No wind, no sound, just that deep, honest silence that exists only outside. I rode until I could see nothing but the sky above me, black and endless, dotted with stars. Then I dismounted. The horse lowered its head, grazing the sparse grass the moon found. I sat down in the dust, drew my knees up, and looked up.

The stars looked different than I remembered. They had once annoyed me because they were silent while I burned. Now I liked them, precisely because of this indifference. They reminded me that nothing is eternal, not even anger.

I thought about my life. About what I had done, and what had done to me. I was never good, never pure, never smart enough to do things right. But I had been honest, in my own way. I had fought because I didn't know how to live, and now I was living because I had finally stopped fighting.

The ground was cool and dry. I lay down, watching the horse's breath in the moonlight. I said softly, "We've come a long way, you and I." It didn't answer, but I didn't need an answer. Some truths are silent.

I thought of the anger that had sustained me for so long. It had never gone away, only become quieter. Like an old dog that accompanies you, even when you no longer need it. I liked the image. Anger hadn't been my enemy. It had allowed me to survive until I learned how to live without it.

I closed my eyes, listened to my own breathing. Even, calm. I felt the pain in my bones, in my back, in my hands. But it no longer bothered me. It was part of the whole, like dust and wind and time. I thought: Peace is not the absence of pain. Peace is when you no longer need it to feel you.

I laughed quietly, for no reason. Only because life, tired as it was, was still there. I said, "I'm no longer the Boneless One. I'm just Ivar breathing."

I lay like that for a long time. The sky moved, the stars wandered, the moon moved on. I thought: Perhaps this is the greatest thing a person can achieve—to become still without dying.

At some point, I stood up, placed my hand on the horse, and felt its warmth. I said, "Come. We'll find a new morning." It raised its head, and I knew it understood, as well as any animal can understand.

I mounted again and rode slowly off. No destination, no shadow, no promise. Just movement, so light it was almost still.

The wind blew up, cool, gentle. I breathed it in. It tasted of earth, night, and oblivion. I liked it.

And somewhere in the distance, among the stars, I briefly thought I heard a laugh—my own, young, raw, wild. I grinned. "Yes," I said quietly. "I know. You're right. It was worth it."

Then I rode on, into a night that owed me nothing.

Morning came slowly, almost timidly. First gray, then light. No fire, no storm—just this soft, even brightness that settled over the land, as if saying, "One more day." I was awake before the sun crept over the hills. I sat there, wrapped in my coat, the horse beside me, the air cool and still.

I felt the wind coming, soft, friendly, weightless. It smelled of earth, of water, of what remains. I looked to the horizon, where the sky was slowly changing color—first pale, then gold, then that warm light that makes everything seem more honest, even the wounds.

I stood up, stretched, felt the cracking of my bones, the pulling in my legs. Once, it would have made me angry. Today, it sounded like music. I grinned. "Well, old friend," I said to myself, "we're still creaking, but we're going."

The horse looked at me and snorted. I put my hand on his neck. "We're going, yes." I saddled slowly, without haste. Every movement had weight, and that felt good. I liked that there was no rush. I liked that nothing had to wait.

I climbed up and turned around once. Behind me was the night, the path, the stars that had long since disappeared. I thought: Maybe this is freedom—when

you turn around and see nothing holding you back. No guilt, no dreams, no anger. Only emptiness, and it feels right.

I set off on my ride. The sun rose higher, warming my back. I felt the light running over me, over my shoulders, over the saddle, over the horse's head. I thought: This is what forgiveness feels like. Not great, not holy. Just warm.

The path was dry, solid. No tracks, except my own. I saw them disappearing into the dust behind me, and I knew they would soon disappear. Everything disappears. And that was a good thing.

I thought of the anger. It was still there, somewhere deep inside, calm, patient. But it no longer burned. It was a shadow, following without leading. I said quietly, "You may stay. But you no longer speak for me."

I rode on, and with every step I felt lighter. Not happy—that was never my goal. But calm. I liked the silence. I liked that nothing demanded I be more than I was.

In the distance, I saw a tree. Large, old, solitary. I rode toward it, stopped, and dismounted. I placed my hand on the trunk, felt the life within, the pulse of the earth. I said, "I have arrived." Not somewhere, not with anyone—simply in the now.

I stayed there for a while, then ascended again. The sky was clear, vast, and bright. I laughed softly. A genuine laugh, without teeth, without mockery. The first in a long time that didn't want anything.

I said, "I am Ivar. And that's enough."

Then I rode on, into the light. No goal, no end, no song. Just a man, a horse, and a sky that let him go.

And somewhere, deep inside me, I knew: the anger had become silent, and that was the loudest victory of my life.

The City of Fire

The day was hot. The light burned down on the ground, and the sky was so clear it hurt. I'd been walking for hours, my mouth dry, my head empty. The horse was breathing heavily but evenly. He knew how to persevere without complaining. I liked that about him. We understood each other, without words, without promises.

At some point I smelled it. First faintly, then clearly: smoke. Not wood, not food. Burning oil, pitch, fabric. The smell of something coming to an end. I urged the horse on, slowly, carefully. After a while, I saw it—the city.

She lay in a valley, half-burned, half-alive. A thick cloud of black smoke hung above the rooftops, the sun a dim patch in it. I heard screams, distant, muffled. I rode closer, step by step. The air grew warm, then hot. I felt it drying my skin.

The gates were open. No one was guarding them. Only a dog lay in front of them, dead, cramped, its teeth still bared. I dismounted and walked in. The horse followed, slowly, suspiciously.

The streets were empty except for a few shadows that ran, stumbled, and fell. The stench was thick, heavy, almost tangible. Wood, grease, blood. I saw houses whose windows burned like open mouths. I thought: This is what it looks like when people forget themselves.

A woman ran past me, barefoot, with a bundle in her arms. She didn't see me, only the direction she was fleeing. Behind her, a roof collapsed, sparks rained down like golden rain. I backed away, the wind bringing ash with it, hot and sharp. It caught in my beard, on my tongue.

I continued walking, slowly, calmly, because rushing was useless here. A man came out of an alley, staggering, his hands bloody, his face covered in soot. He looked at me, stared briefly, and said, "Help me." Then he fell. I knelt down beside him and saw the wound. An arrow in his stomach, deep inside. There was no saving him.

I asked quietly, "Who?" He opened his mouth, blood came out, not a word. Then he was silent. I placed my hand on his forehead and closed my eyes. Not out of pity, but out of respect. He had fought, like everyone else. And lost, like everyone else.

I stood up and moved on. Smoke everywhere, fire everywhere. I saw children screaming, men drinking, women carrying what they could salvage. And in their

faces, the same emptiness—no hatred, no grief. Just this dull recognition that everything they had was burning.

I stopped at a well, took some water, and washed my face. It was warm and tasted of ash. I laughed quietly. "Even the water burns here."

I thought: Cities are like people. First they build, then they forget what they're for, and in the end they perish. I looked around, the walls, the chaos, the light. And somewhere in between, in the sound of the fire, I heard something that sounded like my past.

I said quietly, "I'm back, old friend." The anger stirred, deep, calm, almost curious. I took a deep breath. "But this time, just to watch."

Then I continued into the burning city.

I went deeper inside. The fire was everywhere, but not fierce. It ate steadily, calmly, like an animal that's full but keeps eating because it can't help it. I turned down a side street where the smoke was thinner. There he sat—an old man, gray, thin, barefoot, on an overturned barrel. He didn't move. Only the flames reflected in his eyes.

I stopped, a few steps away. He saw me, but without surprise, as if he'd been waiting for me. I nodded. "Is this your house?" I asked. He smiled crookedly, a mouth without many teeth. "Used to be one of these." "And now?" "Now it belongs to the fire. Like everything here."

I sat down on a stone opposite him. The ground was warm, the breeze smelled of burnt fat. The old man turned his head slightly, looked back into the alley where the heat danced. "Do you see that?" he asked. I nodded. "This isn't a war. This is a homecoming."

I remained silent. He continued speaking, slowly, with that calmness of people who have lost everything that can be frightening. "No one came from outside. No enemy, no army. We did it ourselves. First we argued, then we drank, then we screamed, then we burned. And now we sit here and act as if it were fate."

He coughed, long and dry. I handed him my waterskin. He took it, drank, and shook his head. "Tastes like iron. Like blood." I grinned. "That fits." He laughed quietly, briefly, honestly. "You're not from around here." "No." "But you know fire." I nodded. "More than I'd like."

He looked at me for a long time. "I know you. Not your face, but the way you act. You're one of those people who thought they could do better." "Maybe." "And?" "I've learned that everything burns if you hold on tight."

He grinned and nodded slowly. "Wise words for one who's still alive." "Wisdom comes late. And rarely." He laughed again, then fell silent, looking into the flames. "Do you know when I realized it?" he asked after a while. "What?" "That we set ourselves on fire. Not because we had to. But because no one knew what peace was anymore. Peace is frightening. It's too quiet. We need noise to feel real."

I looked at him. He was right. I'd seen it in other faces, in other countries, on other fields. People who couldn't live without fire because they didn't know what they would be without it.

"And you?" he asked. "Are you looking for peace?" I thought for a moment. "No. I'll let it find me." He nodded. "That's wiser."

A piece of roof collapsed nearby, sparks flying. The old man didn't move. I asked, "Are you coming out with me?" He shook his head. "I lost my house, my life, my wife here. If it took everything, let it take me too." I said nothing. I understood him. Sometimes getting up is harder than burning.

I handed him the rest of my bread. He took it slowly, looking at it as if it were a gift. "Thank you," he said. I stood up. "Goodbye, old man." He nodded. "Go on. Not everyone can get out. But someone should see what's left."

I left. When I looked around, he was still sitting there, in the shadows, bread in hand, watching the flames. I thought: Maybe this was his peace. Just sitting and watching it all end, without running away.

The wind changed, carrying the smoke away. I saw part of the city flickering in the light, bright, almost beautiful. I thought: beauty and doom have the same smell.

Then I rode on, deeper in, to where the smoke became thicker.

I came to a wider street, cobblestone, cracked, and covered in ash. The wind had shifted, blowing gusts of smoke between the houses. The horse shied briefly, and I calmed it with my voice. "Calm down," I said. "It's just the sky coughing."

Then I heard it—laughter. High, bright, piercing. No madness, no pain. Children. I stopped and listened. Between two half-burned houses, something moved. I got off and went closer.

Four children, barefoot, smeared with soot. They ran through the smoke, chasing sparks, screaming with joy as the embers danced in the air. The oldest was perhaps ten, the youngest barely four. No one cried. No one asked questions. They laughed as if the fire were a friend.

I stopped and watched them. A piece of cloth was burning on the ground; someone was stepping on it as if it were a game. Another dragged a stick through the embers, drawing lines in the dust. They only saw me when I approached. The laughter stopped, but there was no fear. Just curiosity.

"What are you doing?" I asked. The oldest girl looked at me, her eyes bright and clear. "We're playing." "With what?" "With fire." I nodded. "And why?" She shrugged. "Because it's fun."

I looked at them standing there—small, black with smoke, their hair matted, their hands sore, but no fear in their faces. Just this raw, pure life that doesn't yet know what it costs. I said quietly, "It hurts when it touches you." The girl grinned. "Then I won't touch it."

I laughed, quietly, without joy, but also without bitterness. "Good plan." A little boy came up to me, holding out a charred splinter of wood. "Sword," he said proudly. I took it, turning it over in my hand. "Looks like it's been fighting a lot." He nodded. "I won." "Against whom?" He pointed in the air. "Against everything."

I squatted down and looked at him. He was dirty, thin, but alive. I said, "Keep this. But be careful not to believe it." He didn't understand. Of course not. I gave him back the stick. He ran off again, laughing.

I stayed there for a while. The children ran, jumped, and played among the ruins, and for a moment I saw how life goes on, even in ruin. I thought: Perhaps that's the cruel beauty of it all—that the world burns itself to death and yet continues to laugh.

The oldest girl came to me again. "Are you a warrior?" I looked at her. "I used to be." "And now?" "Now I'm someone who sees how things turn out." She nodded seriously. "Then you have to look far." "I noticed that."

She went back to the others, and the laughter started again. I stood there, watching sparks fly through the air, children's hands grab them, glow fleetingly and then fade away.

I thought: This is how it all begins. And this is how it all ends. With amazement.

I climbed back on my horse. The wind brought the smoke deeper, thicker. I pulled my coat over my mouth. Before I rode off, I looked back once more. The children continued playing, unafraid, clueless. I hoped they would keep it—that laughter that doesn't know what it's laughing at.

Then I urged the horse on, riding on through the burning dust, while above me the sky looked as if it had seen enough.

I found it on the outskirts of the city. The temple still stood, half blackened by smoke, half intact, as if the fire had decided to show reverence. The steps were warm, the doors open, and the wind carried ashes inside like offerings. I dismounted, tied the horse to a stone that might once have been an altar. Then I went inside.

It was quiet inside. The smoke drifted in thin wisps through the roof, where cracks let in the light. It wasn't the light of the gods, but that of the sun—sober, indifferent, but real. I preferred it that way.

The walls were painted, or they once were. Now only shadows of images, bodies, weapons, flames, faces. I recognized the old gods. Odin, Thor, Freyr—names that once carried weight. Now they seemed tired, erased, like old men who remember former strength without still feeling it.

I continued forward, to the main altar. The stone was black, but cool. I placed my hand on it, felt the cracks. I said quietly, "I know you tried." No echo. No sign. Only wind.

Above the altar was an inscription, half-eaten away by soot. I approached, blowing away the dust. Words in an ancient language, barely legible, but I deciphered them:

"Even the God who creates must watch his work consume itself."

I laughed, quietly, harshly. "Now that's what I call honest." I sat down on the steps and looked up at the spot where the roof had burst. The light fell directly onto the altar, as if someone had invited the sun.

I thought: Maybe this is the true temple—one where no one speaks, no one prays, no one judges. Just stone, air, and the memory of what people have invented to cope with pain.

I stayed there. Outside, something crashed; somewhere a house fell. I heard it, but it didn't bother me. The temple was quiet, and that was all I needed.

I thought of all the years I had prayed. Not to gods, but to my own wrath. I had made sacrifices to him—people, cities, love. And he had taken them all. Now he was silent, and I wondered if he had forgotten me, too.

I looked at my hands. Dirty, scarred, old. Hands that had killed, held, lost. I placed them on my knees, and for a moment there was nothing. No guilt, no pride. Only weight.

I said quietly, "You must be tired. I am too." Then I laid my head against the stone, feeling the cold on my forehead. I liked that. It was honest.

A gust of wind came through the roof, making the ash dance. It swirled around me, like snow, gray and beautiful. I thought: Maybe this was her way of responding. No thunder, no words. Just dust.

I stayed like that until the light changed, until the day drew to a close. I stood up and looked at the inscription once more. I muttered, "Yes, you're right. We're eating ourselves." Then I went out.

Outside, the city continued to burn, quietly, methodically. I mounted and looked around one last time. The temple stood still, unfazed. I said, "Hold on, old stone." Then I rode on.

I thought: When even the gods are tired, all that's left for us to do is live honestly. Without forgiveness, without fear. Only with our eyes open.

And I kept it open.

I was almost at the edge of the city, where the fire was fading. The smoke lay deeper, thicker, sweet from the burning wood, the grease, the dirt. I heard footsteps, irregular, hurried. Then I saw him—a young man, barely twenty, wearing a coat that had once been white. Now gray, torn, blackened with soot. In his hand he held a piece of wood with a carved symbol—a hammer, perhaps, or a cross.

He stumbled, fell to his knees, muttered words. I barely heard them, but I knew the sound. A prayer. Old formulas, old hopes, spoken into an air that had long since lost its response.

I dismounted and approached. He didn't see me, he continued praying, his gaze fixed, his lips dry. I stood there, watching him. For a while, no one said anything. Only the crackling of the fire, eating away at the silence.

Then I spoke. "Who are you praying for?" He looked up, his eyes red, smeared with smoke. "For all of them." "And?" "I... I don't know if anyone's listening." I nodded. "They're not."

He stared at me, and I saw in his gaze the same crack I'd seen in the mirror before—the moment when faith turns to doubt and a person realizes they're alone. I crouched down, down to his level.

"How long have you been praying?" I asked. "Since it started." "And has it helped?" He was silent. Then he shook his head. "But I can't stop." "Yes," I said calmly. "You can. Anyone can."

He looked away, staring at the flames reflected in a broken window. "If I stop praying, everything is meaningless." "Then it was meaningless before, too." He was breathing heavily, his hands shaking. "You talk like someone who has stopped believing." "I've just learned that gods don't bear guilt. We do it ourselves."

He looked at me, searching for an argument, but found none. I said, "You want to put out the fire?" He nodded. "Then stop praying. Start fetching water."

He laughed softly, a broken laugh. "There's no more water." "Then run. Get out of here. You can't extinguish a fire that burns in the heart."

He was silent for a long time. Then he slowly stood up. The piece of wood fell from his hand. I saw him look at it as if it were a part of him, then he stepped on it. The crack in the symbol sounded like an answer.

I asked, "What's your name?" "Erik." I nodded. "Go, Erik. You've prayed enough." He looked at me, and I knew he understood. Not everything, but enough. He turned around and walked down the path, stumbling but walking. I watched him until the smoke swallowed him.

I picked up the broken symbol and turned it over in my hand. It was warm, almost alive. I said quietly, "You were always just mirrors. We used you to hide

ourselves." Then I threw the piece of wood into the fire. It burned quickly, quietly, like everything here.

I stood there for a while, watching the smoke rise. I thought: Maybe prayers are just memories we can't let go of. And at some point, they catch fire.

I returned to my horse and mounted. Behind me, the city burned, in front of me the sky, gray and silent. I rode on. No remorse, no triumph. Only this quiet knowledge that nothing that burns lasts forever—not houses, not people, not gods.

And somewhere in the distance, beyond all the smoke, I briefly thought I heard a bell chime. Perhaps wind, perhaps memory. I smiled. "You're late," I said quietly. "But at least you're here."

Then I rode out of the city.

I rode until the smoke thinned. The air was breathable again, but it tasted of metal, of burnt stone, of what had once been life. The ground was black, brittle, crunching beneath my hooves like glass. I let the horse walk slowly until the path rose and the town diminished. At the top, I stopped.

From here I saw everything. The valley, the walls, the towers, the fire. It was beautiful. Not in the usual sense. But in that honest, cruel way, where destruction is sometimes more beautiful than order. Flames crept across roofs, drawing lines like a painting. Smoke rose in spirals, as if someone had tried to write with sky ink.

I sat there, reins loose, and watched as the city slowly grew quieter. No more screaming, no more crashing. Just that deep, muffled sound when something collapses. I thought: This is what truth sounds like. Not loud. Just final.

I had seen many cities burn. I had set some on fire myself. Others were already ashes when I arrived. And each time I had thought I would feel something. Triumph, guilt, power. But this time it was different. I felt nothing, and that was precisely what peace was.

I thought of the old man in the shadows, of Erik with his broken faith, of the children playing with sparks. All part of the same story. People who love fire until it consumes them. And maybe, I thought, that's not a mistake at all. Maybe it's meant to be this way.

I looked at my hands. Soot, dirt, blood that had long since dried. I rubbed them together until they looked cleaner, but they never completely did. I smiled. "It's good," I said quietly. "One should see where one comes from."

The sun slowly set, red, heavy, like a tired eye. I liked the light. It softened even misery. I thought: Everything humans build has an end. Because everything that comes from hands carries longing within it. And longing is a flame. It warms until it consumes.

I remembered a sentence someone once said to me when I was young, too proud, too loud. "*Destruction is God's way of starting over.*" I laughed then. Not anymore.

I dismounted and sat down in the grass. The horse stood still, grazing as if the world were normal. I saw the city for a while longer, until it was just glowing. Then it was over. No more fire, only smoke rising into the night, like a last breath.

I lay back and looked up at the sky. Stars appeared, timidly, cautiously, as if afraid to shine over ash. I whispered, "You're late. But it's good that you're trying."

The wind blew over the hill, carrying away the last of the smoke. It smelled of earth. No longer of death, only of new beginnings. I liked that.

I thought: Maybe this is the order. Things burn to make room. For others. For new things. For silence.

I stood up, dusted off my knees. "Come," I said to the horse. "I've seen enough." It raised its head and snorted, as if it knew it wasn't supposed to turn around for too long.

I rode off, slowly, downhill, away from the fire. Behind me was the city, ahead was darkness. And somewhere in between, the realization that even the most beautiful downfall is only a pause.

I woke up early. Before the sun rose. The night had been quiet, too quiet, as always after a fire. No wind, no animals, no voices. Only the quiet cracking of the earth as it cools. I sat there, the blanket over my shoulders, and looked east.

The sky was pale, gray, and a thin streak of smoke hung on the horizon. Like a final thought the world hadn't yet let go of. I watched it as it swirled, faded, and faded away.

The horse stood next to me, eating quietly. It was peaceful, as if it had forgotten everything. Maybe it had. Maybe that was the trick of life—forgetting the things you can't change. I envied it for that.

I took a sip of cold water and wiped my mouth with my sleeve. The taste of ash was still there, but fainter. I liked that. Memories have the same taste—they remain, but they no longer bother me.

I thought of the city. The fire, the children, the old man, Erik with his broken faith. I wondered if anything had survived. Maybe a house, a song, a smell. Maybe nothing. Maybe that was enough.

I stood up and looked at the smoke once more. It was almost gone. Just a veil merging with the sky. I said quietly, "This is how everything that burns ends. Not with a scream, but with a sigh."

I laughed, briefly, honestly. It didn't sound bitter. Just realization. I thought: Perhaps I myself am such a remnant. No more fire, no more warrior. Just smoke, dissipating.

I looked at my hands. Scars, cracks, soot. They looked foreign, but they were mine. I thought: Maybe this isn't about becoming clean. Maybe it's about making peace with the dirt.

I saddled the horse. It snorted, stamped, ready. I placed my hand on its neck. "Yes," I said. "We'll go on. On and on."

I set off on my ride. The sun rose over the hill, warm and clear. The light fell on the land, burned but not dead. Grasses would grow again. Water would return. Life, too. It had always been this way.

I looked back, one last time. The smoke was gone. Nothing was there, just the suspicion that something had once been there. I nodded. "Good," I said quietly. "Just forget about me."

Then I turned away and rode on into the new day. No destination, no song, no glory. Only the knowledge that everything that burns will one day fall silent. And that silence is not an end, but what remains when everything has been said.

I smiled. Not because I was happy. But because I finally didn't have to do anything anymore.

The wind picked up, carrying dust across the plain. I felt it on my face, cold, clear, real. I whispered, "Yes. I'm still here."

Then I let go of the reins and let the horse run. Not away. Just onward.

And behind me, somewhere deep in the world, the last piece of fire went out.

No hero, no god

I arrived in a village, small, quiet, clean enough to seem foreign. No ash, no smoke, no blood. Just everyday life. Chickens, voices, children, a dog that barked at me briefly and then lost interest. I liked that. I liked places that knew nothing about me.

I dismounted and tied the horse to a post. The people looked at me briefly, scrutinizing, but not hostilely. Just cautiously. I went to the well, drew water, and drank. Cold, clear, with a hint of iron. It tasted of life.

An old man sat nearby on a bench, the sun on his face. He looked at me, then said, "You're coming from the south." I nodded. "It's burning there, I heard." "It was burning." He nodded slowly. "Always the same. People build until they can't stand it anymore."

I sat down next to him. He smelled of earth and smoke, but not of fear. "What's this place called?" I asked. "Skarnheim." I nodded. "Sounds old." "It is." He grinned, yellow and friendly. "Even death forgets us sometimes."

I grinned back. Then I fell silent, and so did he. We watched life unfold. Women carried laundry, men chopped wood, children ran. Completely ordinary. And that's exactly what made it beautiful.

After a while, he said, "You look like someone who's seen a lot." "Enough." "Then you know what I mean when I say: The gods are tired." I nodded. "I've seen them. They're sitting up there counting the wars we blame on them." He laughed. "And?" "They've stopped counting."

He patted me on the shoulder. "That's what I thought." Then he leaned forward, his voice quieter: "Have you heard of the Boneless One? The legless warrior who burned cities and rode on the shoulders of the gods?"

I looked at him, said nothing. He continued, as excited as a child: "A demigod, they say. He killed with his fingers, commanded with his eyes. A wrath of flesh and iron." I took another sip of water. "Sounds exhausting." He grinned. "Yes, but he was tall. They say even Odin shook hands with him." "And what did he do with it?" "He broke it, I think."

I laughed quietly, honestly. "Sounds like someone who's gotten too much attention." "So you don't believe in him?" "Oh, I do believe he existed. But he was probably smaller, quieter, dirtier than you're telling."

The old man looked at me questioningly, frowning. "You talk as if you knew him." I looked into the well, into the water that reflected my reflection. "Perhaps I did." He laughed loudly. "Then you're living dangerously, friend. The Boneless One was a demon, they say." "They say." I grinned. "They say a lot of things."

He nodded, stood up, and dusted himself off. "Well then, stranger. If you meet him, tell him that Skarnheim is still standing." "Will do."

He left, and I stayed seated. I looked into the well. My reflection looked tired, but honest. Not a hero. Not a god. Just a man carrying too much history with him.

I thought: That's the problem with legends. They keep growing while you shrink. And at some point, you no longer fit into what they're making of you.

I looked up at the sky and said quietly, "I am not a hero. And I was never a god." Then I drank the last sip of water, stood up, and left.

I stayed overnight in Skarnheim. An old woman rented me a room above the smithy. The floor was uneven, the air smelled of metal and sleep, but it was dry, and that was enough. I was no longer fussy. I ate bread, drank beer, sat quietly in the corner, listening to the crackling of the furnace. The blacksmith worked downstairs until late. Every blow of his hammer sounded like a heartbeat, steady, patient. It was soothing.

I was sitting in the semidarkness, my back against the wall, when I heard voices. Not loud, but close. Two men, maybe three, in the room below me. The wind

carried their words through the cracks in the floor. I listened, unintentionally. But their sentences stuck with me.

"I'm telling you, it was the Boneless One. Who else burns down a city and moves on like it's nothing?" "Nonsense. He's dead. Years ago. Didn't even make it to Kattegat." "Dead or not – the name remains. And where the name remains, so does the fear." "I heard he laughed when they tied him up. Laughed! Like an animal." "A god doesn't laugh. Only a human who has nothing left to lose."

I smiled quietly. They talked about me as if I were a ghost, a story, a horror story for children. I didn't mind. Stories are easier to love than people.

The blacksmith intervened. His voice was deep, calm. "I don't believe in gods. And certainly not in heroes. Anyone who is called great has just been lucky to survive longer." "And what about fame?" someone asked. "Fame is dirt that glitters while the sun shines."

I liked the man. He sounded like he'd seen things that had tired him out. One of those people who doesn't brag because they know how thin the ground is.

They kept talking. About battles, wars, men with names no one wants to forget. About blood that stops counting when it becomes too much. I listened, and at some point I realized I was smiling. Not out of pride. Just because it's strange to hear your own echo, and to know that it sounds louder the deader you are.

I lay down, the wood beneath me warm from the fire below. The hammer continued to bang, regularly, almost soothingly. I thought: Perhaps this is true glory—when you become the sound others use to fill their boredom.

I eventually fell asleep. I dreamed of nothing. No blood, no fire. Just wind.

When I woke up, it was still dark. The hammer was silent. Outside, dew dripped from the roof, and somewhere a dog barked. I stood up and looked out the window. The sky was clear, a few stars still visible. I thought: Maybe this is enough. Not to be loved. Just remembered.

I got dressed and packed my things. The blacksmith was snoring downstairs. I left a few coins on the table, quietly, as one does when one doesn't want thanks. Then I went outside, into the cool air.

I paused briefly, looking at the village. Lights in the windows, smoke from the chimneys. A peaceful place. I hoped it would stay that way.

Then I whispered, "Go on with the story." I grinned. "But make it look better than it was."

Then I left. Slowly, quietly, until the darkness took me again.

The morning was clear, too clear. The air had that smell that only a new day has—cold, clean, without memory. I walked along the path that led out of the village. No destination, only direction. The ground was damp, the grass still wet with dew. Every step sounded faint, like a retreat.

I didn't turn around. The village lay behind me, small, peaceful, uninterested. And that was a good thing. I'd been through enough places that knew me. Places that whispered as I passed, places where I was still cursed or revered. I didn't like either.

The sun rose over the hills. I stopped for a moment, letting the light touch my face. It was warm, honest, unintentional. I thought: This is what the world feels like when it has forgotten you. And it felt good.

I kept walking, for hours perhaps. Birds flew, a fox ran across the path, somewhere someone was chopping wood. Life carried on as if it had never needed me. And perhaps it never had.

I remembered the days when everything around me stood still when I entered a village. Men bowing their heads, women dragging children away just because I breathed. I had thought that was power. Now I knew it was just fear disguised as respect.

I walked past a field, farmers at work. One looked up briefly, nodded at me. Just that. No recognition, no whisper. I nodded back. A sincere greeting between strangers. I could have laughed. It was the friendliest look I'd received in weeks.

I thought: Maybe that's the meaning of it all. Disappearing until you no longer mean anything to anyone. Not because you're unimportant, but because you're no longer needed. Peace has nothing to do with memories. Peace is what remains when no one talks about you anymore.

I continued walking, over a hill, along a stream. I saw my reflection in the water. My face had grown old. Wrinkles, beard, eyes that no longer searched. I looked at the man who looked at me and thought: You are no longer the person they say you are. And that's a good thing.

I sat down on the bank and let my hands dangle into the water. It was cold, clear, and alive. I liked the feeling. I thought: The world doesn't need heroes. It needs people to clean up the mess after the heroes are done.

I sat like that for a while. The water flowed, steadily, patiently. No resistance, no goal, just movement. I envied it a little.

I stood up again and looked at the horizon. It was wide, open, empty. I grinned. "Let's move on then," I said aloud. My voice sounded strange, but real.

I set off, the horse behind me. No song, no prayer, no reason. Just the walking itself.

And somewhere deep inside me, where the fire once was, there was now only a gentle wind. No more anger, no more glory. Only silence.

I want you.

Rain began to gather in the afternoon. Dark clouds rolled in from the west, slow and sluggish, like tired soldiers. I saw them and knew: I wouldn't be sleeping under the open sky today. The wind grew stronger, cold and heavy. I pulled my coat tighter and urged my horse on.

After a while, I saw something by the side of the road. An old guard post, half collapsed, half forgotten. Moss covered the stones, the door crooked, but still there. I dismounted and tied the horse under the eaves. It lowered its head, glad of the shelter. I went inside.

The room was small, empty, smelling of rain and old smoke. A fire pit, a few stones that had once been a bench. I sat down, took off my wet boots, and stretched my legs. It was dripping from the ceiling. The rain was really coming down now, pounding against the roof, a steady rhythm that drowned out everything else.

I looked around. On the wall, half-covered by moss and dirt, something was carved. Ancient runes, barely legible. I stood up and wiped away the dirt as best I could. Words emerged, irregular, crooked, but clear enough to make sense:

"No name lasts longer than the rain."

I read it twice, then smiled. "That's probably true." I sat down again, leaning back. The sentence stayed in my head, heavy and light at the same time. No name lasts longer than the rain. I thought of everyone I'd known. Warriors,

kings, gods. All with names that were once loud. Now quiet. And eventually, gone completely.

I reached out and let a few drops fall through the broken ceiling onto my fingers. Cold, clean. I liked the feeling. I thought: Maybe this is the point. Not to last forever, but to pass well.

I looked at my hands. The scars glistened in the light of the drops. I rubbed them as if I could wash them away. But they remained. Of course they remained. I laughed quietly. "All right. Then it's just you and me, old friend."

The wind pressed against the door, making it creak. The horse snorted restlessly outside. I stood up, walked to the opening, and looked out. Rain, nothing but rain. The sky was gray, the land empty. No more fire, no city, no name echoing. Only the sound of water falling because it can do nothing else.

I stood in the doorway, watching drops hit the floor, bursting into small circles. I thought: All we're doing is making waves disappear. And maybe that's enough.

I sat down again and laid my head against the wall. The rain sounded steady, almost friendly. I closed my eyes and breathed. No dream came, no image. Only darkness and the sound of life going on.

I thought of what used to be—of glory, of blood, of the pride you carry like a shield until it becomes too heavy. And I thought: I've carried enough.

I opened my eyes and looked at the wall. The runes glistened with moisture. I said quietly, "Yes. No name lasts longer than rain. And no one should have to."

Then I lay down. The stone beneath me was cold, but honest. The rain above me was incessant, but peaceful. I liked that.

Outside, the storm raged on, and inside, all that remained was silence. Good, old silence.

I woke up early. The rain was almost over, only a few drops falling from the ceiling, irregular, like the ticking of an old clock. The air was cool, fresh, and smelled of wet earth. I lay there on the cold stone and listened. No wind, no voices. Only this quiet dripping that said: *Still there.*

I stood up, slowly. My body ached, as always. My joints were stiff, my muscles heavy. But it wasn't a bad pain. It was proof that I was still alive. I rubbed my

hands, looked at the scars that ran across my skin like old roads. Each one led somewhere I no longer needed to go. I liked that.

Outside, the sky was gray but bright. No thunder, no storm. Just calm. I stepped outside, and the horse stood there, wet but calm. It looked at me as if it knew day had returned. I patted its neck. "We made it through," I said. It snorted, which was enough of an answer.

I looked around. The guard post stood still, dark and glistening from the rain. The ground was soft, the dirt clinging to my boots. Drops of rain fell from the trees everywhere, small sounds that together created something like peace.

I took a few steps and sat down on a rock. The sun slowly broke through the clouds, faint but real. I held my hands up to the light. It felt like someone I'd forgotten was greeting me.

I thought: This is all that remains. No armies, no hymns, no cries. Just this. A man, a horse, a sky that doesn't care, but still sends light.

I remembered the past, nights in blood, mornings in mud, faces I never wanted to forget but still lost. And I thought: Maybe that's the meaning of survival—not to keep fighting, but to finally stop.

I laughed quietly. It sounded hoarse, but good. I said, "I'm still here. And that's enough." No pathos, no pride. Just truth.

I stood up, stretched, and took a deep breath. The pain in my back, the pulling in my leg—all familiar. I accepted it like an old companion. I used to fight it. Now it was simply a part of me.

I saddled the horse and pulled the reins loosely. Before mounting, I looked back at the sentry post. The inscription on the wall was barely visible from here, but I knew what it said. *No name lasts longer than rain.* I nodded. "I know. And that's a good thing."

I set off, slowly, across the damp ground. The sky opened, revealing a patch of blue. The sun warmed my neck. I thought: Maybe what remains isn't an end at all. Maybe it's just silence, which finally doesn't hurt anymore.

I smiled. Not a big smile, just a small, honest one. The horse walked calmly, the path lay open. And for the first time in a long time, I felt that nothing more was needed. That survival was enough.

I said quietly, "I've lost, won, burned, cursed, loved. And in the end—I'm still here."

That was enough.

The day grew long. I rode until the sun was tilted and the light softened. The path led me to a river, wide, calm, dark with rain. I dismounted, let my horse drink, and sat down on the bank. The ground was damp, but that didn't bother me. I'd ridden on worse.

The water flowed steadily, patiently. No noise, no resistance. Only movement. I looked into it, saw my face, distorted by the current. I liked that. It was honest. No hero's face, no god, no name—just an old man who'd been on the move too long.

I took a stone and threw it in. The waves created circles, erasing the reflection, briefly bringing order to the chaos before everything quieted down again. I thought: That's how stories work. Someone throws something in, and everyone just sees the waves. No one asks who threw the stone.

I remembered the words of the old man in Skarnheim, the rumors, the laughter that had outlived me. I thought: Maybe that was the mistake. I let them turn me into an echo. And at some point, the echo sounded louder than I did.

I reached into the water and let it run through my fingers. Cold, clear. I watched the drops fall back, each with its own little circle. I said quietly, "I was never who you wanted." The water didn't answer, but it didn't need to. It understood me in its own way.

I leaned back and looked up at the sky. The first stars appeared, shyly, like children after a fight. I thought: The world needs heroes because otherwise it won't forgive itself. And heroes need lies because truth never shines.

I used to believe I was greater than the men around me. Tougher, wiser, more divine, perhaps. But that was just rage in armor. I was never more than someone who couldn't give up. And now that I finally could, it didn't feel like loss. It felt like peace.

I pulled the knife from my belt, saw my reflection in the blade. My face was angular, tired, but alive. I said, "You're not a hero. You're what's left when no one's watching anymore." Then I put it back.

The river murmured softly, steadily. I liked the sound. It was the same tone the world uses when no one is listening. I sat there, watching the last light disappear. No fire, no calling, no gods. Just water and sky.

I thought: Maybe that was the point of it all – to find yourself again after the world has invented you.

The wind blew over the water, cool and clean. I breathed deeply, letting it flow through me. I felt empty, but not hollow. Just calm. I thought: Maybe this is the opposite of glory—enduring silence.

I looked into the river once more. The reflection was back, faint, flowing, like a memory. I nodded at it. "All right," I said quietly. "Then we're even."

I stayed sitting until the sky turned black. Then I stood up, saddled the horse, and rode on. No destination, no plan. Just the thought: I'm still here. And that's enough.

Morning came silently. No colors, no glow, just that pale gray that makes the world seem as honest as it is. I was already awake before the sun decided to climb the horizon. The river was calm, a thin mist hanging over it, like breath on cold glass. I sat there, still in the same spot, legs stretched out, hands in my lap. I had barely slept, but I wasn't tired. Just empty in a good way.

The horse stood on the bank, drinking, snorting, looking over at me. I nodded at it. It had no idea who I was. Maybe that was for the best. Animals don't distinguish between kings and beggars. They only notice if you're peaceful. I was. For the first time in a long time.

I leaned forward, looked into the water again. The reflection was barely there, just shadows and movement. I recognized myself, but without weight. No name, no title, no myth. Just a face that existed. I liked that. I thought: Maybe this is what remains when everything else is gone—simply being there, for no reason.

The sun broke through the fog, a faint golden light. It fell on the water, on my hands, on the ground. I saw the steam rising, like smoke from something that had been burning for a long time and was now finally dying out. I thought: Yes, exactly. That's me.

I stood up, slowly, my body stiff but obedient. I felt every joint, every twinge, but it didn't bother me. The pain had become familiar, almost friendly. It reminded me that I was still here.

I went to the horse and placed my hand on its neck. Warm, alive. I said quietly, "We've seen a lot, huh?" It didn't react, but I felt it breathing. A steady, calm rhythm. That's how the world breathes, if you let it.

I saddled up, tightened the girths, and mounted. I looked down at the river once more. The water flowed on, indifferent, patient, eternal. I thought: Maybe that's the difference between us and the world. We fight, it flows. And in the end, it always wins.

I set off, slowly, through the grass wet with dew. The ground absorbed my hooves, quietly and softly. There was no path, no footprint behind me. Only the sound of the water I left behind.

The sun rose higher, the clouds dissolved. I felt the light on my skin, warm, almost tender. I smiled. Not a big smile, just that small, honest one you have when you no longer have to prove yourself.

I thought: Maybe life isn't a struggle at all. Maybe it's a conversation that you end quietly at some point because you understand what was meant.

I looked ahead, far away. No goal, no plan. Just the open land. I felt light. No glory, no faith, no anger. Just an old man who survived because at some point he stopped dying.

The wind blew from the east, carrying the scent of grass and water. I took a deep breath. "Thank you," I said quietly. Not to anyone, but simply.

Then I rode on without looking back. And somewhere behind me, in the fog, the last echo of my name faded.

Only the sound of the river remained. And that was enough.

The Voices in the Fog

The day was still young when the fog came. First a thin veil, then thicker, heavier, until everything around me became a single gray wall. The sky, the ground, the trees—everything disappeared. It was as if someone had erased the world and left me forgotten. I rode slower, my hand on the horse's neck to keep it calm. The fog swallowed every sound. No wind, no bird, no footstep. Only the quiet breathing of us both.

After a while, I heard something. At first I thought it was wind, but it wasn't. It was a voice. Soft, barely audible, as if it came from far away, from a memory, not from the air. I stopped and listened. It came again. Not one, but several. A whisper, indistinct, words without form. I couldn't grasp it, but I knew the sound. That soft, familiar calling you only hear from the dead.

I said quietly, "You've left me alone for a long time." No answer, of course. Just thicker fog, as if it wanted to come closer. I felt something stirring inside me, not a feeling of fear, more of a tugging sensation. That old weight you think you've lost, until it makes itself known again.

I dismounted. The ground beneath my feet was soft and damp. I walked a bit, feeling my way forward, until I could see nothing but gray. The fog was warm, almost alive. I thought: Maybe this isn't weather. Maybe this is memory in the form of air.

Then I heard it more clearly. A voice, right in front of me, female, calm. "Ivar." I stopped. I knew her. I knew her, even though years lay between us. I closed my eyes. "Mother."

Nothing. No shadow, no face. Just the fog, growing thicker. I heard that whispering again, now from everywhere. Laughter, shouts, single words. Some sounded like names, others like screams. I said, "You're late." The fog answered with a sound that sounded almost like breathing.

I continued walking, slowly, step by step. I didn't know if I was moving or if the fog was carrying me. The voices came and went, shimmering, broken. I recognized some. Men I had killed. Friends who had died beside me. Women who had cursed me. I heard them all. And among them, my own laughter, young, raw, arrogant. It sounded strange, like someone who had played me.

I stopped and said, "I know who you are. I carried you all. And lost you all." The fog fell silent for a moment, as if listening. Then another voice came, deep, calm, male. "And who are you now?"

I grinned. "No one." The fog moved, pulling in threads around me, cool against my skin. Then whispers again, this time soft, almost friendly. I didn't understand the words, but I felt them. They said: *Stay*.

I shook my head. "No. Not anymore." I took a step back, then another. The fog didn't dissipate, but the voices grew quieter. Maybe disappointed, maybe satisfied. I didn't know.

I climbed back on the horse. The fog was so thick that I couldn't even see the mane. I said, "We'll move on. You've said enough." The horse moved slowly, cautiously.

After a while, I heard nothing again. No whispering, no footsteps. Just my breathing. I thought: Maybe that wasn't a ghost. Maybe it was a memory trying to make sure I hadn't forgotten it.

I rode on, into the gray. No direction, no destination. Only the quiet, steady sound of the breathing of two living beings who no longer owed anything to the dead.

And somewhere deep in the fog, I thought I heard someone laughing. Quietly. Like a farewell.

The fog grew thicker. I could barely see the horse below me. Just gray, gray everywhere, so deep that you felt like you were breathing memories. The ground was soft, swampy, and every hoofbeat sounded as if it were being swallowed up again. I stopped. The horse trembled slightly. I put my hand on its neck. "Calm down," I said. "They won't hurt us."

Then they came. The voices, clearer, rounder this time. No whispers, no screams. Just voices, the kind you know when the fire is still burning and the mead is still warm. I heard Sigurd first. He laughed, like he always did—too loud, too confidently. "Ivar, you bastard. You survived, huh?"

I laughed quietly. "Looks like it."

Then Ubbe came, calmer, heavier. "I've been looking for you, brother." "I've been here the whole time," I said. "Just in a different place." "We thought you were dead." "Maybe I am."

Their voices circled me. No shadows, no figures, just words moving through the fog like smoke over a fire that never fully goes out. Hvitserk spoke next. His voice was brittle, tired. "I remember the day you laughed as we fell." I nodded. "I remember too. But the laughter wasn't real."

Silence. Then Sigurd again. "We weren't heroes, Ivar." "No," I said. "We were children who thought gods were watching us." "And?" "They looked away."

I heard her laughter, that honest, old laugh that no longer wanted anything. I felt the pressure in my chest ease. No anger, no rage. Just that quiet warmth you feel when you're finally no longer alone.

"You know," said Ubbe, "I always thought you hated us." "I did, too. But only because you reminded me I couldn't." He laughed. "Typical you. Always too smart for your own good."

I looked into the fog, searching for their faces, but found none. But I didn't need them. I knew every laugh, every pause. I knew them better than I ever knew myself.

"And now what?" Hvitserk asked. "Do you want to come back?" I shook my head. "I'm no longer part of the stories, brother. I'm what remains afterward." "And that is?" "Silent."

They laughed again, but this time differently. Softer, more understanding. I felt something inside me loosen. Perhaps guilt, perhaps just a tired memory.

"Ivar," said Sigurd, "you know you never lost us, right?" I looked into the gray expanse. "I never found you to lose you." "That's the old Ivar," said Ubbe. "Cynical to the end." "Not cynical," I said calmly. "Just honest."

I wanted to say something else, but the voices grew quieter. One by one. First Sigurd, then Hvitserk, then Ubbe. Only a final whisper remained. "We are always here, brother. If you are quiet enough, you will hear us again."

I nodded. "I know. But this time it's enough."

Then there was silence. No whisper, no echo. Only fog and the sound of my breathing. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and let the air circulate within me. It tasted of iron and earth, of what remains when everything has been said.

I opened my eyes. The fog had become lighter, almost transparent. I could make out outlines again—trees, grass, a path that led on. I patted the horse's neck. "They're gone," I said. "And we'll keep going."

I rode off. The voices behind me faded, but they didn't feel lost. More like something that had finally found its place.

And as the fog slowly lifted, I thought: Perhaps what we call ghosts is only what remains of us when someone is still listening to us.

I smiled. "Then stop now," I said quietly. "I'm tired."

And the fog was silent.

The fog slowly lifted, like an old curtain finally allowed to fall. The gray became thinner, softer. I saw trees, stones, the outline of a path. And then, further ahead, something large and dark. A hall. Wide, made of wood, grayed by the weather. No smoke, no fire. Just silence.

I dismounted and led the horse to the entrance. The door hung crooked, but it was still standing. I pushed it open. The smell of dust, earth, old dreams. The floor was covered in moss, the roof had holes through which thin rays of sunlight fell, like faint memories. I stepped inside.

Inside, it was cool, quiet, almost reverential. The air tasted ancient. On the walls, runes were carved in irregular rows. I approached, running my hand over them. Some were deep, clean, others half-weathered, smoothed by time and moisture. I recognized words. Fragments of prayers, names, oaths. But many were illegible. The rain had softened them, the wind had forgotten them.

I stopped and read what was left:

"Here, men spoke with gods. Now only stones speak."

I nodded. "So be it." My voice echoed faintly, lonely. I heard it coming back, muffled, smaller, as if afraid to disturb the peace.

I sat down on an old beam lying across the ground. The dust swirled a bit, then settled again. I breathed deeply. No anger, no weight. Just this calm, clear feeling that I was in the right place.

I looked around. Traces of hands everywhere. Runes carved with knives, fingernails, perhaps with bones. People had talked here, prayed, screamed,

hoped. And at some point, stopped. I thought: Maybe this is the way things are. First we call out, then we listen, then we forget why.

The wind blew through the cracks, bringing with it a faint hum, almost like voices. I listened briefly, but there weren't any. No whisper, no echo. Just the wind playing in the void. I smiled. "Good," I said quietly. "Stay calm. I'm not here to talk."

I stood up and walked forward to the old altar, a piece of stone, half-broken. On it was moss, earth, and remnants of ash. I placed my hand on it. It was cold, damp, but firm. I said, "You've heard enough. Now be silent."

No thunder, no sign. Only the silence that remained. And it felt right.

I sat back down, watched the light coming through the roof. Dust danced in it, like little souls too tired to ascend. I thought: Perhaps this is freedom—when even the voices no longer have questions.

I sat there for a long time. It could have been hours, or days. Time had no meaning here. The fog outside kept the rest of the world at bay, and inside there was nothing but breath, wood, and the past.

At some point, I stood up and went to the door. Outside, the air was clearer. The fog hung lower, but the sun was breaking through. I turned around once more and looked into the hall. "Thank you," I said. For the peace. For the silence. For the end of the voices.

Then I stepped outside. The fog was no longer gray, but silver, light. I breathed it in. No weight anymore. Just air.

I climbed onto the horse. It was quiet, peaceful. I placed my hand on his mane. "Come," I said. "We're done here."

And as we rode on, I thought: Maybe even memories must die at some point so that people can continue to live.

I smiled. No goodbye this time. Just moving on.

Evening came without me noticing. The fog had thickened again, but this time it was different. Softer, warmer. No more gray that swallowed me up, but a veil that made the world quieter. I rode slowly, my head slightly bowed. The path was barely visible, but I trusted the horse. It knew where it was stepping.

I thought of the hall, the runes, the silence that remained. I thought of how many people had tried to say something to the gods, only to find that the gods had long since ceased to have anything to say. Perhaps it was always this way. In the end, we talk to ourselves, and if we're lucky, we eventually listen.

The fog moved as if it were breathing. I heard the horse's quiet snort, then silence again. And then—a voice. Quiet, familiar. Not a hallucination, not an echo. A voice that sounded as if it had always been there.

"You talk too much, Ivar."

I stopped, stayed calm. I didn't look back. I knew where she was coming from. Not from the fog. From me.

"I know," I said. "But I've been silent for too long."

"And what do you want to say now?" the voice asked. It was calm, clear, without judgment.

I thought for a moment. "Nothing. I just want it to finally stop feeling like guilt."

A quiet laugh, almost friendly. "And do you think words change that?"

"No. But sometimes they make things easier."

I heard the rustling of the fog, like someone sitting down. Then silence. I waited, unhurried.

"You were cruel," the voice said. "Yes." "You were proud." "Yes." "You were weak." "Often." "And you loved." I smiled. "Yes. That too."

Silence again. An honest silence that demanded nothing more.

Then the voice said, "And what are you now?"

I looked into the fog. "Tired, but alive."

"That's enough," she said.

I breathed deeply, feeling the fog move as if it were embracing me. No pressure, no pulling, just this quiet feeling of peace.

"You know," I said quietly, "I always thought I was cursed by the gods." "Maybe you were. But you survived them." "And now?" "Now you're free."

I closed my eyes. The voice sounded like me, older, clearer. No echo, no ghost. Just my own conscience, finally daring to be quiet.

I nodded. "I needed you sooner." "I was there the whole time. You were just too loud to hear me."

I laughed quietly, almost with relief. "That sounds like me."

"And now?" she asked. "Now I'm going on." "Where to?" "Where it will be quiet."

I opened my eyes. The fog had become lighter, almost transparent. The sun was setting, a faint red glow in the gray. I looked at it the way you look at something you don't want to hold on to.

I said, "Thank you." "For what?" asked the voice. "For staying until I could listen."

She didn't answer. And that was the nicest answer she could give.

I rode on, slowly, my gaze forward. The fog lifted, the world became visible again. I felt light. No anger, no gods, no guilt. Just a heart that still beat because it wanted to, not because it had to.

And somewhere, deep inside me, I heard myself say:
"You did it."

Night came quietly. No wind, no sound, no birds. Only the mist, hanging in thin threads between the trees and glittering when the fire flickered. I had set up camp not far from the river. A small circle of stones, a handful of dry branches, a fire that provided just enough warmth to keep the cold at bay. I needed nothing more.

The horse stood nearby, its head bowed, half asleep. I sat there, legs stretched out, a piece of bread in my hand that I didn't really eat. I stared into the flames, and for the first time, I saw no faces in them. No blood, no screams, no past. Just fire. It burned because it burned. Just because.

I thought: This is what life should be like. No purpose, no goal. Just existence. I took a small stick and poked at the embers. Sparks rose, danced briefly, and disappeared again. I watched them and smiled. Once, I would have looked for signs in them. Today, I saw only fire.

I leaned back, my back against a rock. The warmth slowly crept through my clothing. I felt the weight of the day, the weeks, the years. But it felt different. No longer like a burden, more like a blanket. I pulled it over me and let it lie.

I thought of the voices. Of the hall. Of what they had said. It was all still there, somewhere, but quiet. Not gone, just peaceful. Like old friends who no longer need to speak to be understood.

I looked up at the sky. Above the fog were stars. Few, faint, but real. I remembered looking up at them as a child, convinced someone was watching up there. Now I knew there was no one there. And that was okay. The thought didn't make the world emptier, but more honest.

I took a sip of water, tasted earth, metal, life. I smiled. "Still here," I said quietly. Just to myself. And that was enough.

Then I lay down and pulled my coat over my shoulders. The fire crackled, the fog thickened around me, like a soft hand taking away the last vestiges of unease. I closed my eyes.

No dream came. No images. No screams. Only darkness, silent but not threatening. I heard my own breathing, steady, calm. I thought: This is what peace feels like. Not loud, not radiant, not heroic. Just quiet.

I didn't know how long I lay there. Time lost its meaning. Maybe hours, maybe only minutes. But when I opened my eyes again, the sky was brighter. The fog had lifted. Morning had arrived. I had slept. Really slept. For the first time since... I couldn't remember.

I sat up and looked at the fire. It was almost out. Just embers. I reached out my hands toward it, felt the warmth, the life within. I smiled.

I said, "Thank you." Not to anyone. Not to anything. Just like that.

Then I stood up, stretched, and took a deep breath. No weight, no noise, no shadow. Just air. I felt light.

And somewhere inside me I thought: Maybe that was all it was about. Just being able to sleep. Without a war on my mind.

The morning was clear. The fog still hung in the lowlands, but it had lost its weight. It was no longer the old enemy that clings to you, but merely a residue, vapor dissipating in the sun. I stood there, my hands on the embers until they

grew cold. Then I stamped them out, slowly, with respect. One shouldn't leave behind a fire that wants more than to warm.

The horse snorted, as if it knew we had to move on. I placed my hand on its mane. "Yes," I said. "We're going."

The ground was still damp, but firm. Every step felt safe, familiar. I looked back, to where the fog was still thick. He stood among the trees, unmoving, calm, as if he didn't want to let go of me, but also didn't want to swallow me anymore. I nodded to him. "Stay where you are."

I walked a bit, my horse behind me. The air was fresh, clear, with that smell that only comes after a storm—damp earth, old wood, a hint of life. I breathed deeply. It felt as if every breath made me feel a little lighter.

The voices were gone. No whispering, no humming, no echo. Only silence. But it wasn't empty. It was full. Full of things that had finally stopped talking. I thought: This is what peace sounds like. Not like music, but like nothing. And this nothingness was beautiful.

I stopped and looked up at the sky. Blue, bright, almost tender. The sun rose over the hills, without drama, without power. Just like that. I liked it. Before, I would have looked for a sign in everything. Today, the sign was that there was none left.

I thought about the years, the battles, the fire I'd left behind. And I knew I didn't have to apologize anymore. Not to the gods, not to the dead, not to myself. Some things aren't forgiven; they just stop hurting.

I mounted the horse, sat calmly, felt the muscles beneath me, the steady breathing. I said, "Now it's just us." It moved forward, leisurely, without haste. No destination, no task. Just movement.

I rode up the hill, the fog behind me thinning, lightening. The wind blew from the front, carrying the scent of grass, of water, of the world. I looked into the distance, and for the first time in a long time, the emptiness didn't feel like loss, but like possibility.

I thought: Maybe this is what they call salvation. No gate, no light, no angels. Just the decision to move on, without asking for direction.

I grinned, quietly, honestly. "Then this is my heaven," I said. And it didn't sound sad at all.

I let the horse run until the fog behind us was a memory. A gray dream that no longer demanded anything. I felt the wind on my face, the taste of tomorrow on my tongue. No blood, no smoke, no echo. Only life.

I thought: I was a king, I was a cripple, I was a god, I was an animal. But now I'm just me. And that's enough.

And somewhere far away, where the fog still kissed the land, I thought I heard a faint laugh. Not mocking, not sad. Simply laughter. Perhaps mine. Perhaps the world's.

I didn't turn around.

I entered a valley as the sun was setting. The sky was clear, a vast blue slowly turning to gold. No more fog, no more wind. Only air, still and warm, like the breath after a long dive. The horse walked calmly, its hooves barely making a sound. I loosened the reins. It knew we'd arrived, even if I didn't say it out loud.

The valley was empty. No houses, no people, just meadows and a small stream winding through the rocks. I dismounted, let the horse drink, and walked a little way up the slope. Up there lay a flat area of soft grass. I sat down and looked down at the water, which glittered in the light.

I built a small fire, nothing big. Just a few dry twigs I found. The wood hissed as the flames rose, and I liked the sound. It reminded me of life itself—short, bright, and without any intention. I lay back, hands under my head, looking up at the sky.

It was clear. So clear that you could almost believe it had been remade. I didn't count the stars, I just saw them. Before, I would have tried to find meaning in them. Today I knew they were simply there, whether anyone was looking or not.

I thought of the voices. Of my mother, of my brothers, of all those who had talked, laughed, and screamed. I thought of how they faded into the fog. And I knew they weren't gone. They were inside me, but had become silent. Like songs you no longer sing because you know them by heart.

I grabbed a stone and threw it into the stream. The splash echoed briefly, then there was silence again. I grinned. It's that simple. You do something, the world responds, and then it goes back to business as usual. No drama, no echo. Just balance.

I placed my hand on my chest, felt my heartbeat. Calm, steady. I thought: He's not beating for fame, not for faith, not for fear. He's beating because he can. And that's enough.

The fire crackled, the embers turned red, then dark. I felt no cold, only that pleasant tiredness that comes when you've been on the road long enough and finally don't have to run anymore. I said quietly, "It's good here." Not to anyone. Just to hear.

I closed my eyes. No dreams came. Only darkness, soft and peaceful. I heard the water running against stones, the gentle rustling of the grass, the horse's breathing. Everything sounded like a single, tranquil melody.

And in that silence, I knew: I was never cursed. I was just loud. Too loud to hear the world whisper.

I took a deep breath, smiled, and let it go. No fire, no fog, no voices. Just me, the grass, the sky.

For the first time since I could remember, I felt at home.

And the wind blowing across the valley was calm enough not to disturb me.

Winter without end

The next morning was different. Colder, harder. The sky had lost its blue, and the wind blew from the north, sharp as a warning. I woke before the light had fully arrived. My breath hung in the air, small clouds that immediately vanished. The fire had long since gone out, only gray ash remained. I poked around in it, finding no embers.

The horse stood still by the stream. Its breath steamed, and it stamped its hooves lightly, restlessly. I understood the feeling. There was something in the air. Something coming, quietly but surely.

I stood up and stretched. My back creaked, my leg ached as always, but that was nothing new. I pulled my coat tighter and looked up at the sky. Gray, heavy, calm. It was that calm that bodes ill. One that's about to break.

I stepped to the water and washed my face. It was ice cold. The taste of winter was already there—metallic, clean, merciless. I took a few sips, wiped my mouth, and said quietly, "So there you are again."

Winter. The old enemy who doesn't need armies. It simply comes, takes everything without question. No hatred, no intent. Only the cold that remains.

I looked around. The grass was pale, the ground hard, and the wind carried the scent of snow. No peace lasts when the world freezes. I knew that. I'd seen it often enough. Peace was always only an in-between thing—a respite between two frosty nights.

I saddled the horse. It shook its head as if to protest, but it let it happen. I patted its neck. "I know. You want to stay. Me too. But nothing stays warm."

I set off, up the slope. The valley lay behind me, quiet, beautiful, but already strange. I turned around once, saw the water glittering, the grass trembling in the wind. A place built for summer. I said quietly, "Farewell."

At the top of the hill, I paused briefly. From here, the view was far. The land stretched out like a giant, sleeping body. Everything was silent. But the cold was everywhere. It crept into my fingers, my breath, my thoughts. I pulled my coat tighter and lowered my head.

Winter never comes suddenly. It creeps. First it sends the wind, then the shadows, then the hunger. And by the time you realize it's here, it's too late to leave.

I rode on, north, to where the land was harder, but more honest. The ground froze beneath my hooves, the grass cracked. I felt my hands go numb. And somewhere deep inside me, something returned. Not anger, not pain—just that old, clear feeling that I had to fight again, this time not against people, but against the world itself.

I thought: Maybe this is the real war. Not blood and steel, but the cold that whispers to you that you can stop. And you say: Not yet.

I laughed quietly. "Not yet, old friend."

The wind responded with a howl that sounded like approval.

I rode on, and as the first snow fell, I watched it melt on my coat—slowly, peacefully. It wasn't winter yet. Only the memory of what was to come.

But memory is the beginning of everything. And also of the end.

The snow came during the night. First quietly, barely visible, then thicker, heavier, merciless. I had found the hut by chance, half-ruined, nestled among the hills. A roof, four walls, an old stove that was still standing. I needed nothing more. I drove the horse inside, left it standing in the shade, and closed the door with a beam. Outside, the wind whipped, and the howling sounded as if the world itself were groaning.

I lit a fire. It took a long time. The wood was damp, the spark hesitant, but eventually it burned. Weak at first, then stronger. The light flickered across the walls, across the dust, across the traces of past winters. I sat down in front of it, placed my hands on the fire until they regained feeling.

The snow continued to fall, incessantly. I heard it rattling against the roof, pounding against the door. That steady sound that tells you: You're locked in. But it didn't bother me. I liked being locked in. It was honest. Outside was war, inside was survival.

I looked into the flames. The heat hurt, but in a good way. I thought: This is what life feels like—first too cold, then too hot, never in between. I stretched out my legs, pulled my coat tighter, and the smoke stung my eyes slightly.

I remembered other winters. The ones when I lay with men in tents, the blood freezing on the blades, the screams frozen in the air. I remembered nights when we laughed because we knew the morning might not want us. And the silence afterward, when the snow covered the dead like a merciful priest.

I thought: I've survived more winters than I deserve.

The fire crackled. A spark jumped, burning on the ground. I followed it with my eyes until it disappeared. Then I heard the wind again. It had grown louder, almost furious. I stood up, checked the door, pushed the beam tighter. The snow pressed against it. The world wanted in. I smiled. "Not today."

I sat down again, pulled the blanket over my shoulders. My body was tired, but my mind was awake. I looked into the flames, and there it was again – that feeling that winter wasn't just outside. It was creeping inside, slowly, silently. Not through cold, but through memory.

I thought: Maybe winter begins in the heart. When you stop warming yourself with what was. When you learn that fire is just an illusion that you nurture until it dies.

I took a piece of wood and added it. The smoke drifted off at an angle, the stove growled. I said, "Stay a little longer. I'm not ready for the cold yet."

Outside, the howling grew louder, almost human. I listened. Maybe it was the wind. Maybe it was a memory knocking at my door again. I thought of faces. Of laughter. Of what never comes back.

I whispered, "You're too late. I've already outlived you."

The wind didn't respond. It just beat harder against the walls. But I knew this wasn't a threat. This was proof that I was still there.

I closed my eyes, breathed in the smoke, the warmth, the wood. My body felt heavy, my head light. I thought: So this is how it is. No more fighting. No more victory. Only waiting. And waiting is also life.

The fire continued to burn, quietly and steadily. I leaned my head against the wall and let the crackling carry me. Winter could rage outside. Inside, it was quiet.

I said quietly, almost smiling, "I'm ready, but not finished."

Then I closed my eyes. The snow continued to fall, patiently, like a hand covering the world so it can finally sleep.

I woke up because it was quiet. Too quiet. No wind, no cracking, no dripping. Only that muted, almost holy silence that snow brings when it smothers the world and simultaneously redeems it. I opened my eyes. The embers were cold, the stove black. My breath hung in the air like smoke.

I straightened up. Every muscle felt heavy, but alive. I rubbed my hands, stood up, and put on my coat, pulling the hood down over my face. The door was half-covered in snow, the beam frozen solid. I had to push it open with my shoulder. When it opened, light came in—bright, pure, merciless.

Outside, everything was white. No gray, no brown, no green. Only white. The land, the sky, the trees. There were no more lines, no edges. Only a vastness that knew no distinction. I stepped outside. The snow crunched beneath my boots, deep, soft, cold. I stopped, letting the light blind me.

It was beautiful. Not in the warm sense. Beautiful like truth. Cold, clear, without mercy. I took a deep breath. The air cut my lungs, almost burned. I liked that. It felt real. Not a dream, not an echo. Only now.

The horse stood half-shadowed, its mane covered in ice. It raised its head and looked at me. Not a sound, not a snort. Just that calm, animal knowledge that there's nothing to say when the world is like this. I went to it and placed my hand on its neck. The fur was cold, but alive underneath. I said, "We're still alive."

The sky was cloudless. No sun to be seen, just this light coming from everywhere. I looked at my hands. They were chapped, cracked, but steady. Not shaking. I thought: This is the difference between living and surviving. Living wants more. Surviving just doesn't want to lose anything.

I walked a bit up the slope. The snow reached my knees. Every step was heavy, slow, but steady. I turned around and saw the hut, small, half-swallowed by the white. A dot in the void. I smiled. This is what home looked like when you didn't have one.

I stopped at the top. From here, I could see far away. Only snow, endlessly. No movement, no sound. And yet – it wasn't empty. It was full. Full of that which is silent. I thought: This must be what it's like when the world stops making noise. No death, no end. Only peace.

I raised my head and released my breath. It rose, mingled with the air, and disappeared. I watched it and thought: Maybe that's all you do. Breathe in and out until the world absorbs you, without discrimination.

I sat down on a rock that barely protruded from the snow. The cold crept through my clothes, but I let it. I wanted to feel it. I wanted to know I was still here.

I remembered all the years I'd spent fighting winter—with fire, with anger, with pride. And now, here, I thought: The trick is to stop fighting. The trick is to become still until the cold accepts you.

I laughed quietly. The sound sounded strange in the silence, as if the world couldn't place it. I said, "I'm no longer an enemy."

The snow fell again, gently, evenly. I watched it settle on my boots, on my hands, on my coat. No resistance, no sense of loss. Just balance.

I sat there until my fingers went numb. Then I stood up and walked back to the hut. Every step left traces that disappeared immediately. I liked that. No past, no evidence. Just movement.

Inside, I lit the fire again, slowly, calmly. The flames came slowly, but they came. I warmed my hands, watched them. Outside, snow fell, inside, there was light. I thought: That's enough.

I said out loud, almost as if in response to something no one had asked: "I'm not afraid of winter anymore."

And for the first time I believed in myself.

I stayed. I didn't know how many days it had been, and at some point I stopped counting. Time meant nothing here. The sky barely changed color. The snow fell, then it stopped, then it fell again. Sometimes it fell so softly that you felt it rather than saw it. Sometimes so thickly that the world disappeared. But it always came back, as if nothing had happened.

I slept when I was tired. I ate when I was hungry. I didn't speak. I had no words left. And that was okay. Words only make sense when someone is listening, and here there was no one but me and the horse. It usually stood outside, head bowed, calm, patient, the way living beings who understand the world better than humans do.

I lit a fire whenever I found wood. It was hard to find any dry enough. I'd go out, trudge through snow up to my waist, break branches from dead trees, and carry them back. Every time I closed the door, I smelled of wood, smoke, and silence. I liked that smell. It told me there was still something I could do.

Sometimes I just sat there. For hours. I heard the crackling of the fire, the dripping of melted ice, the slow breathing of the horse. That was all it needed. I thought: Maybe this is prayer. No asking, no thanking. Just being.

I felt the cold inside me. Not the kind that freezes, but the other kind—the kind that calms. I used to fear it. Now it was a part of me. I thought: Winter isn't an enemy. It's just being honest. It takes everything you don't really need. And if you give it nothing more, it leaves you alone.

I often looked out. Sometimes the sun shone, pale and distant, like an old memory. Then everything was made of glass—the land, the sky, even my breath. I just stood there, held my hand over my eyes, and smiled. Not because it was beautiful. Because it was real.

At night, I sometimes heard noises outside. A crash, a crack, maybe an animal, maybe just the snow moving on its own. I listened, but I wasn't afraid. Fear was

for people who believed they still had something to lose. I only had myself, and that was enough.

Sometimes I spoke quietly to the fire. Not to get an answer, but so I wouldn't forget the voice. I said things like, "Well done." Or, "That's enough." Or simply, "There you are." It wasn't crazy. It was human.

I started measuring the days by sounds. When the wood cracked, it was morning. When the wind died down, it was night. It wasn't a bad trade. Time was more honest that way.

I didn't know if I was waiting for something. Maybe for the snow to stop. Maybe for me to stop. Maybe for there to be nothing left to remind me of movement.

But then, one morning, I woke up, and it was quieter than usual. No wind, no snow, no sound. I stepped out the door, and the white was soft, almost golden. The sun was low, large, heavy. I looked at it until my eyes burned. And I thought: Maybe this is all there is. No sign. No destination. Just a moment warm enough to carry on.

I went back to the hut, sat down, and put my hands on the fire. It burned evenly, quietly. I said quietly, "I've learned to stay still." And it was true.

The snow fell again. Slowly, peacefully, like dust on an old book.

I watched him, and for the first time in a very long time, I thought nothing. Nothing at all.

And that felt like prayer.

The snow lay higher now. I had stopped measuring it. It came every night, took what it wanted, and left nothing behind but silence. I lived like the snow—indifferent, simple, consistent. I ate little, slept a lot, and spoke hardly at all. Days became patterns of cold and fire, of breath and silence.

One morning, as the light filtered dimly through the cracks, I heard something outside. A sound that wasn't part of the wind. Weak, broken, like a painful breath. I stood up, put on my coat, and opened the door.

Outside, everything was white, except for a small, dark patch a few feet away. I went over. It was an animal. A fox, thin, half-buried in the snow, its breathing

shallow, its fur matted. I knelt down. It raised its head, tried to hiss, but only a hoarse wheeze came out. Its eyes were clear, alert, but tired. I knew that look.

I said quietly, "Calm down. I won't hurt you." I slid my hands under his body, feeling him tremble. He was barely warm anymore. I carried him into the hut and laid him next to the fire. The smoke rose, and he pulled his head back slightly, like someone remembering light.

I sat next to him, stretched out my hands, and gently rubbed his fur to get the moisture out. I had no idea why I was doing it. Maybe because it was the right thing to do. Maybe because I knew what it was like when no one was doing anything for you anymore.

I broke off a piece of bread and placed it next to him. He didn't move. I thought he was already too far away. But after a while, he turned his head, sniffed, and cautiously took a bite. I watched. It was the most beautiful thing I'd seen in weeks—a sign that something was still hungry for life.

I said, "Okay. That's how it starts."

He stayed. For hours. I sat quietly, listening to the fire as it breathed. Every now and then he looked at me. No trust, no mistrust. Only recognition. Two beings who knew they couldn't demand anything of each other. And that was precisely what connected us.

When night came, he fell asleep, curled up, close to the fire. I stayed awake, watching him breathe. Calmly, evenly. I thought: Maybe this is all God is—a moment when you warm something other than yourself.

Outside, the wind raged again. It beat against the walls, trying to get in. I added more wood. I said, "Not today. We're having company."

The fox twitched slightly, perhaps in a dream. I leaned back and closed my eyes. I was tired, but it was a good kind of tiredness. The kind that doesn't have to prove anything anymore.

I thought of earlier nights, of men, of fire, of cold, of war. And I thought: This is more honest. No songs, no victories. Just warmth, shared, without words.

When I woke up the next morning, the fire was almost out. The fox was gone. Only tracks in the snow led out, disappearing a few meters further. I stood there, watching them.

I smiled. "That's right."

I lit a new fire, broke the remaining bread, and ate. The smoke drifted quietly away, and outside everything was silent. No trace of life, but that didn't bother me. I knew it was still there somewhere out there. And that was enough.

I said quietly, "See you when it thaws."

Then I sat back down by the fire, my hands over the embers. It was warm. Not much, but enough.

And that was more than I ever needed.

The days grew harder. The snow was now so deep that I could no longer tread it, only cut it. Wood was running low, bread was almost gone, and the horse stood still as a statue, only its eyes still alive. But I wasn't afraid. I was beyond fear. If you live with the cold long enough, it no longer becomes an enemy, but a habit.

I ate less. Sometimes nothing at all. I drank melted snow that tasted of nothing. But that was okay. I liked the nothingness. It was clean, honest. No salt, no blood, no smoke. Just emptiness.

I remembered feasts in halls, mead and meat, laughter coming from bellies too full. I remembered faces red from the fire, loud, alive, senseless. I remembered sitting amidst the noise and still feeling alone. And now, here, in the silence, I realized that being alone only hurts when you think you need someone else for it.

I went out less often. When the wind got too strong, I waited. When it was weaker, I gathered wood, hunted with a stick, and if I was lucky, I found a piece of root to chew. Hunger was no longer pain. It was a state. Something that simply existed. I thought: Maybe this is purity—when you want nothing more than to breathe.

Sometimes I sat for long periods without moving. I watched the snow fall, the fire flicker, the shadows dance. I felt my body weaken, but my mind became clearer. I understood things I'd never considered before. For example, that there's no difference between surviving and dying if you stop fighting it.

I smiled often. Not out of joy, but out of calm. The kind of smile you wear when you realize everything is okay, even if things don't turn out well. I said quietly, "I'm clean."

The snow outside blew across the roof. The sound was gentle, rhythmic. I closed my eyes, listened to it, and thought it sounded like breathing. Maybe that was it. Maybe the world was just a body, and we were all cells within it that at some point ceased to be needed.

I warmed my hands over the fire, watched the skin crack. I smelled the smoke, which tasted like memories. I thought of Mother. Of her face, which I could barely bring together. Just eyes, a shadow of warmth, a hand that never stopped holding something that had long since fallen. I said, "I know you were right. Everything becomes quiet if you let it."

I leaned my head against the wall, looked up at the ceiling where the smoke was gathering. I saw patterns in it, no faces, no symbols. Just movement. I whispered, "That's enough."

Night came quickly. I added the last branches, wrapped myself in the blanket, and pulled it up to my chin. The horse snorted softly outside, and I replied, "I know, old friend. We're almost through."

I closed my eyes. The hunger was there, but far away. My body was empty, but not sad. I felt light. I thought: Maybe this was what the gods wanted—for us to stop wanting everything.

I fell asleep without realizing it. And the world continued to turn, quietly, indifferently, like a breath between two heartbeats.

I woke up because I heard water. One drop at first, then two, then many. It wasn't a dream. I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was a dark spot on the wall where the ice was melting. It dripped steadily, slowly, like a clock starting to tick again. I sat up. The stove was cold, the fire long extinguished, but the air was different. Softer.

I went to the door and pushed the beam aside. It was no longer stuck. Outside, the snow was no longer smooth. It sagged, wet, heavy, dull in the light. The sun was there. Weak, but there. I stepped outside and blinked. The sky was no longer gray, but had color. Not a strong one, but enough to say: Something is still alive.

I stood there, breathing. The wind was milder, carrying the scent of earth with it. After months, I smelled the world again. I bent down and picked up some snow. It was soft, almost liquid. I let it melt, watched as drops fell to the

ground. It was beautiful. Not a great, radiant beauty. A small, quiet one. The beauty of "enough is enough."

The horse stood outside, its coat dull, but its eyes alert. It looked at me, and I knew it understood. We were through. I went to it and rested my forehead against its neck. It was warm. I said, "See? The world wants to know again."

The snow cracked, falling from the branches. I heard birds, faint, somewhere far away. Not singing, more of an attempt. A first sound after a long pause. I closed my eyes and listened. I had forgotten what sounds sound like when they don't demand anything.

I gathered wood and lit a fire. The smoke rose vertically, no wind, no pressure. I sat down in front of it, holding my hands over the flames. It was different than before. Not to survive. Just to feel.

I thought about the weeks, the silence, the hunger, the cold. And I understood: It hadn't been a winter without end. It was a winter that had to wait until I was quiet enough to see it end.

I looked out. The white became grayer, then darker. Water ran in small rills across the floor. Life returned, inconspicuously, naturally. I smiled.

I said, "You did it." Not out loud, not to anyone. Just as if I wanted to hear it.

I grabbed what little I had and saddled the horse. I rode slowly off, through mud, through remaining snow, through earth that was softening again. The sky above me brightened, bit by bit. I smelled water, wood, dew. No blood. No smoke. No fog.

Behind me lay the hut, small, quiet, almost gone. I turned around once more. No goodbye, no thanks. Just a quick glance. I nodded.

The path ahead of me was empty. But this time it didn't feel like a loss. More like a possibility. Like a beginning.

I rode until the snow disappeared completely. Then I stopped and let my gaze wander. The sun was above me, faint but real. I looked at it without blinking.

I thought: This isn't how winter ends. This is how something new begins.

I took a deep breath, felt the warm air, and said quietly, "I'm still here."

And for the first time in a long time, it didn't sound like a confession, but like a promise.

Brotherly blood

I rode south for two days, maybe three. I had no destination. I just wanted movement. The snow was almost gone, the land smelled of earth, of dew, of returning. I saw birds, heard water, felt sun. It was strange to have all that again. To see that the world goes on, no matter what you've lost.

On the third day, I saw smoke. Thin, gray, rising from behind a hill. Not war smoke, not the kind that smelled of burnt skin. It was campfire smoke, the honest kind. I followed it.

I stopped at the top of the hill. Down in the valley, men were sitting. Three, maybe four. It was hard to tell from that distance. They were wearing furs and carrying weapons, but they didn't look like enemies. More like people left over from the winter. I dismounted and led the horse down the slope.

When they saw me, two of them jumped up, their hands on the handles. I slowly raised my hand. "I'm alone," I said. One stepped forward, looked at me, his eyes suspicious. Then they widened.

"By the gods... Ivar?"

I stopped. I knew the voice. It had grown older, harsher, but it was there. I said quietly, "Ubbe."

He stared at me as if he were seeing a ghost. Then he slowly approached. "I thought you were dead." I smiled weakly. "Maybe I was. But death changed his mind."

He laughed. It was a genuine, tired laugh. The laugh of a man who's seen too much to be surprised. He came closer, put a hand on my shoulder. "You look like shit." I nodded. "You too."

We stood there, looking at each other. No pathos, no tears. Just this silent knowledge that blood lasts longer than pride. The other men came closer, looked me over, one nodded. Not a word. Men who understood that reunions sometimes carry too much weight for words.

Ubbe pointed to the fire. "Sit down. Eat something. You look like you've been through Hel." I sat down and took the bread he handed me. It tasted dry, old, but honest. I chewed slowly, staring into the fire. He sat down next to me. We didn't say anything for a while.

Then he asked, "Where were you?" I looked into the flames. "In winter." He nodded. "Long?" "Long enough."

He remained silent, staring into the fire, and I knew he understood more than words could express. Men like us didn't have to explain anything. We were the ones who had stayed because they had to, not because they wanted to.

"I heard you fell in England," he finally said. I smiled. "I've fallen many times. Just not far enough."

He laughed again, briefly, genuinely. Then he looked at me seriously. "The world has changed, brother." I nodded. "Me too."

He added another piece of wood and watched the smoke rise. "Hvitserk is dead." I looked at him, said nothing. I knew, somehow. I had sensed it. He continued: "He fell in Ireland. Alone. Like an animal." I nodded. "He wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

We were silent. Only the fire spoke. It crackled, breathed, told its own story.

After a while, Ubbe said, "You've gotten thin." I smiled wearily. "Winter took away my excess." He nodded. "He was tough." "He was honest."

He looked at me, scrutinizing me as if he wanted to know if I was joking. But I was serious. I was no longer who I had been. No more anger, no more hunger for power. Just one man left, and that was enough.

"What do you want to do now?" he asked. I looked into the distance. The land lay still, quiet, naked. "Breathe," I said.

He nodded, as if he'd already expected this. "Then we'll breathe together."

I smiled. "Sounds good."

We sat next to each other, two men who had seen too much, yet still shared a fire. No war, no plan. Just flames, bread, breath.

And I thought: Maybe that's the real thing about blood. It doesn't bind you because it's warm, but because it stays, even when it gets cold.

Night came, quiet, windless. The fire burned steadily, and the smoke drifted quietly into the sky. We sat there, side by side, our knees to the fire, bread and meat between us, wine in an old cup that was passed around. The other men were already asleep, curled up in furs, panting softly. Only we remained awake.

Ubbe looked into the fire. "I've cursed you often," he said. No anger in his voice, just tiredness. I nodded. "I know." "I've missed you too." "I know that too."

He laughed softly. "Of course you know that. You've always known everything." "Not everything. Just what hurts."

He turned to me. "And why didn't you come back?" I looked into the embers, into the slow breathing of the fire. "Because I was still too loud. I had to be quiet first." "And now?" "Now I'm so quiet I hardly know who I am."

He drank and handed me the cup. The wine was old, sour, but warm. I took a sip. It burned pleasantly in my throat.

"Father would have understood you," said Ubbe. I laughed quietly. "Father didn't understand anyone. Not even himself." "Maybe. But he would still have looked at you as only he could—as if you were both a curse and a source of pride." I nodded. "He was to me, too."

He added another branch. Sparks rose and disappeared. For a while, we said nothing. Only the fire continued to speak, in that ancient language you only understand after you've been silent long enough.

"I hated you," he said then. "I know." "Because you wanted everything I didn't want." "And you had everything I could never have."

He nodded, smiling faintly. "We were good enemies." "We were brothers."

He looked at me, and there was no anger, no pride. Only that calm, old understanding. I knew we were thinking the same thing: We had never lost each other, we'd just stopped proving ourselves too late.

"You know, Ivar," he said, "I've learned that you don't have to love people to miss them." I nodded. "And that you don't have to miss them to love them."

He laughed softly. "That sounds like you." "I got it from you."

The fire shrank. We stopped adding wood. It burned quietly, contentedly, like a fed animal. The sky was clear, a few stars, pale and distant. I looked up, wondering how many nights we had sat like that—with blood on our hands and gods in our mouths.

"I don't have any gods anymore," I said. Ubbe nodded. "Me neither. I only have myself. And you." I grinned. "This is dangerous." "I know."

We sat like that for a long time. No arguments, no lies. Just two men who were finally tired enough to be honest.

When the fire was almost out, he said quietly, "I've never forgiven you." I nodded. "I never asked for it." He looked at me, smiled. "That's why I can now."

I said nothing. I just placed my hand on his shoulder. Not firmly, not solemnly. Just genuinely.

And in that moment I knew: Forgiveness has nothing to do with guilt. It's just what remains when the anger becomes too tired.

The wind returned, gentle, barely noticeable. It played with the ash, carrying it away. I watched it until it disappeared.

Ubbe said, "You're staying, right?" I looked into the darkness. "Maybe. As long as winter rests."

He nodded, stood up, took a few steps, then stopped. "Sleep, brother. Tomorrow will be day again." "Yes," I said. "And that's enough."

He lay down, and I stayed awake, watching the fire die. No pain, no memory. Just embers.

I thought: That's blood. It never stops glowing, it just gets quieter.

And at some point, just before sleep, I smiled because I finally understood what family really is: a fire that doesn't warm you, but keeps you alive.

The morning came clear and cold. No more snow, just frozen earth that crackled beneath my boots. I got up early, stretched, and watched the smoke from the last embers slowly disappear. The sun was flat, pale, almost shy. I liked the light. It showed everything, but forgiving nothing.

Ubbe was already awake. He was sitting by the stream, his hands in the water, his face serious. The other men were packing their things, cursing quietly, talking about rations, weapons, some way west. I listened, said nothing. You quickly notice when men are restless. It's in the way they move—too fast, too loud, too alert for this hour.

One, a tall man with a scar across his forehead, approached Ubbe. "We should move on. There's no point in waiting here." Ubbe looked at him calmly. "We'll go when I say so." The man grimaced. "You're not our leader anymore, Ubbe. You're tired. We all are. But you act like you still have an army."

I stood up and came closer. The air was heavy. I knew that feeling. That tension, those seconds before something breaks. I said nothing, not yet.

Ubbe straightened up, water dripping from his hands. "If you think you can do better, then go." The man laughed harshly. "You talk like Father. Always orders, never doubts. Perhaps we should remind you how that ended."

Ubbe didn't move. Only his expression changed. I knew that look. I had worn it for years. It meant: Something is about to happen that can't be taken back.

I stepped in, calmly, without haste. "Enough," I said. "The day is too beautiful for blood."

The man turned to me. "And you are?" "Someone who knows how it ends when men talk before they think."

He looked me over, saw the crutch, the scars, the age in my face. Then he grinned mockingly. "A cripple with big words."

I nodded. "A cripple who lives longer than those who call me that."

It was silent. The smile on his face froze. I saw the muscles in his jaw tense. He took one step, just one, but it was enough. I raised my hand, slowly, no trembling, no anger. "Go," I said.

Ubbe said nothing. He just stood there, his gaze fixed on me, not on the man. He knew I had to clarify this.

The stranger laughed, snorted, and took another step. I stepped closer until we were almost level. I looked into his eyes. There was nothing there. No hatred, no courage. Just a hunger for proof. Men like him don't die for ideas, but for their egos.

I said quietly, "You seek war because you can't stand peace. But there's no one left here to fight with you."

He wanted to say something, but I was faster. No scream, no outburst. Just a brief, silent moment, a movement, practiced, tired, precise. My knife was small but sharp. It went into him without resistance. He looked at me, surprised, almost disappointed, like a child who has had a toy taken away. Then he fell.

No one called. No one intervened. Only the sound of his body on the frozen ground.

I stepped back, wiped the blade, and sheathed it. "He wanted a memory," I said calmly. "Now he has one."

Ubbe stood next to me. No praise, no criticism. Just a nod. "It had to be done." I looked at him. "Everything has to be done sometime."

The men lifted the body and carried it away. Not a word, not a look. Only silence, which was heavy, but honest.

I sat down by the fire, which slowly flared up again. After a while, Ubbe came over and sat down next to me. We both stared into the embers.

"I thought you were done killing," he said. "So am I," I said. "But this was just cleaning up."

He laughed quietly, dryly. "You're still you." I nodded. "Unfortunately."

The fire crackled. We were silent. The day dragged on, indifferent, beautiful, cold.

I thought: Peace isn't a place. It's just the moment before you're forced to remember who you were again.

We buried him that same day. The ground was hard, frozen, full of stones that refused to yield. We took axes, sticks, knives. It took a long time. No one spoke. Only the dull thuds, the gasps, the crunch of earth against steel. Death silences men. Perhaps because it reminds us of what we share—finality.

I dug along. Not out of guilt, but because it felt right. The ground was cold, but honest. Every blow was the same, every push meaningless, and that was exactly what was good. I thought: sometimes work is the best form of confession.

Ubbe stood beside me, his face gray from the frost, his hands torn open. He didn't look up, not at the dead man, not at me. Only at the earth. We were no longer children. No fratricidal war, no old words. Just men with a hole in front of them.

When we were finished, we rolled the body inside. No ritual, no blessing. Just a brief moment of stillness, as one does when paying respect to an animal that was about to be eaten. One of the men placed the helmet on his face, another pushed back the earth. I helped.

The snow mixed with the earth, turning into slush that slowly covered everything. I watched the color fade until only brown remained. Then it was over. A grave, simple, quiet, honest.

Ubbe said quietly, "He was stupid, but not a bad man." I nodded. "Most bad people are just fools who think too late." He nodded. "That doesn't change anything." "No. But it explains a lot."

He looked at me, and I realized he was about to say something, but then he didn't. We stood there for a while, our hands in the cold, our thoughts too heavy to speak.

Then he said, "You were right. Peace always comes at a cost." I smiled wearily. "And it's never fully paid for."

We returned to the fire. The men sat down, ate, drank, and were silent. One played quietly with a knife, turning it between his fingers. No one mentioned the dead man. No one said his name. In our minds, he was already dust, and dust doesn't speak.

I looked into the fire, which burned higher than it had in the morning. It consumed wood with a calmness that seemed almost benevolent. I thought of everyone I had buried, with and without reason. I thought of how every action eventually feels like a necessity. And how dangerous that is.

I said quietly, "We talk ourselves into everything, brother. Even the things we hate." Ubbe looked at me. "Otherwise we couldn't live." "Or we live because we stop thinking about it." He nodded. "Maybe that's the same thing."

I laughed quietly, dryly. "Maybe."

Evening came quickly. The light grew softer, the land quieter. I sat by the fire, watching the smoke rise into the sky, slowly turning purple. It was beautiful. So beautiful it almost hurt.

I thought: Every peace has its price. And mine is out there, under the snow and earth.

But I had no regrets. Just that old, clear feeling that sometimes things have to be done so that everything else stops.

Ubbe put a hand on my shoulder. "Sleep, brother." I nodded. "You first."

He laughed quietly, stood up, and went to the others. I stayed seated, alone with the fire.

I looked into the embers until they turned to ash and thought: Peace is not a gift. It is guilt with a new name.

And that night I slept badly. Not because of the dead man. But because I knew I was right.

The morning came gray. No more snow, but frost. The ground was hard, the fire almost out. I sat there, my hands over the last embers, when I heard hoofbeats. Far away, muffled, but sure. Men who knew where they were riding.

Ubbe stepped out of the tent, pulling his coat tighter. "Visitors?" he asked. I nodded. "Sounds like it."

The others reached for weapons. I stayed seated. Those who came after all this winter didn't come to fight. The sound grew louder, then slower. Three riders. One in front, two behind. I saw their shadows, then their faces. The one in front was old, his horse tired, his gaze clear. He dismounted, slowly, with the body of a man who had fallen too many times.

"Who are you?" asked Ubbe. The old man looked at him, then at me. "I'm looking for Ivar Ragnarsson."

I stood up and stepped closer. "Then you've found him."

He looked at me for a long time. "I expected you to be taller." I smiled. "I used to be. Years are a poor blacksmith."

He nodded slightly. "I bring news from Kattegat."

The word hit me like cold air. I hadn't heard it in a long time. It tasted of wood, blood, smoke. Of youth. Of everything I'd lost. I said calmly, "Then say it."

He looked briefly at Ubbe, then back at me. "Kattegat has fallen."

Silence. No wind, no fire, no sound. Only this word, hanging in the air like a knife.

Ubbe stepped forward. "Fallen? To whom?" "Not to whom," said the old man. "What." He waited, then continued. "Hunger, disease, betrayal. No army. No enemy. Only people who have ceased to believe. The city is empty. The halls stand, but they no longer breathe."

I looked at him, and I knew he wasn't lying. Kattegat was always more than a place. It was the thought that we were immortal. And now it was just wood and memories.

"Who's alive?" asked Ubbe. The old man shrugged. "A few. I don't have any names. Those who can are moving west; others are dying on the streets."

I nodded slowly. "So this is how a city ends."

He looked at me searchingly. "They said you were dead." "They say a lot." "And now? What are you doing?" I smiled wearily. "Breathing, mostly."

He nodded. "Then breathe quickly. Winter is not your enemy. Hunger is. It's coming north."

Ubbe stepped forward, serious. "And you? Why are you bringing this to us?" The old man looked at him briefly, then back at me. "Because blood seeks blood. And because when it calls, someone must answer. I've seen brothers die against each other, Ivar. But no one has forgotten whose blood was shed first."

I felt something stirring inside me. Not anger. Not pain. Just that gentle tug that comes when the past takes over again without asking. I looked at my hands. They were shaking slightly. Not from the cold.

"Kattegat," I said quietly. The word burned, even though it had long since turned to ash.

The old man nodded. "We don't need a king anymore. Just someone who knows what silence means."

I laughed dryly. "Then they sent the wrong person."

He shrugged. "Maybe the right one. Who knows."

He walked to his horse and remounted. "I said what I had to say. The rest is your problem, Boneless."

Then he rode off. No greeting, no backward glance. Only hoof prints in the frost, which soon disappeared.

I stood there, watching him until nothing remained. Then I turned to Ubbe. He looked at me, knowing what I was thinking.

"Kattegat," he said. I nodded. "Kattegat."

He took a deep breath. "Are we leaving?" I remained silent. I looked up at the sky. Gray, silent, endless. I said, "I don't know."

He nodded. "Then think about it. But not too long. Places die if no one buries them."

I sat by the fire, staring into the embers that were alive again. I thought of halls, of voices, of blood, of flames. And I knew: I wasn't finished.

Not with the city. Not with me.

Night fell silently. No wind, no sound. Only the fire, burning because I kept it alive. The others were asleep. Ubbe too. I sat alone, my back against a rock, staring into the flames. I couldn't sleep. Not after that name. Kattegat. It still sounded like metal.

I saw the sparks rise, like little memories burning and vanishing. I thought of the halls I knew—the wood, the smoke, the noise, the stench of life. I thought of Father's voice, the battles, the sea crashing against the cliffs as if it itself wanted to live with us.

And now? Empty, said the old man. Abandoned. No blood, no song, only silence. I had thought I'd had enough of it. But this was a different silence. The one within me was peace. The one there was death.

I poked at the fire, heard the wood hiss. I didn't know if it was anger I felt or guilt. Maybe both. Maybe it was the same thing. I hadn't left Kattegat because I wanted to. I had left because I had nothing left to give it. And now it was calling again. Like a wound forgotten until it burns again.

I looked into the darkness. There was nothing. Only shadows, trees, silence. And yet – somewhere out there was the sea. I felt it. That eternal beating, quiet, patient, like a heart that has never stopped.

I said quietly, "You want me back, don't you?"

The wind didn't answer. But the fire crackled briefly, brightly, as if it had laughed. I grinned wearily. "Of course you want to. You always knew I wouldn't get away."

I thought of the dead. Of Hvitserk. Of Sigurd. Of Father. Of all those I had loved, hated, and forgotten. I thought that each of them lay somewhere in Kattegat, in earth, in wood, in memory. And that they were calling me now. Not as a king. Not as a warrior. Just as one of them.

I took a stick and drew lines in the ground. Rivers, mountains, paths. I remembered roads, coasts, the smell of salt and blood. I could see Kattegat, even with my eyes closed. And it wasn't empty. It was awake.

I put down the stick, took a piece of bread, took a bite, and chewed slowly. It tasted of ash. I drank water and looked at the fire again.

I said quietly, "I thought I was done. But you're never done."

Ubbe tossed and turned in his sleep, mumbling something. I looked at him. He always had that peace in his face that I never found. I no longer envied him. But I understood him now.

I looked into the flames again. I thought: Perhaps homecoming isn't a place, but a guilt disguised as a calling.

I reached for the embers, so close that my skin burned. I endured it. The pain was clear, real, vivid. I smiled. "I missed it," I said quietly.

Then I let my hand fall and leaned back. I watched the fire until it diminished, and thought: If Kattegat dies, at least someone who knows how to look should see it.

And I knew I would leave. Not out of duty. Not out of pride. Just because at some point you have to go back to where you stopped breathing.

I closed my eyes, and the last thing I heard was the sea in my head. And it sounded like it was laughing.

The morning was clear, pale, and cold. The sky seemed clean, as if the night had washed everything away. The frost glittered on the grass, the fire was out, only ash remained, gray and still. I got up early, before the others woke up. The air was fresh, crisp, and tasted of departure. I pulled the blanket off my shoulders, took off my coat, and packed what I had—not much. A few pieces of bread, a knife, water. I didn't need anything else.

Ubbe was still lying there, his head resting on his arm, his face calm. I looked at him. It wasn't a look of farewell, more like the way you look at something you've already lost and know you'll lose it again. I placed my hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, slowly, without alarm.

"You go," he said. I nodded. "Kattegat." "Kattegat."

He sat down, rubbed his face, and looked at the fire that was no longer there. "You can't help it, can you?" "No." He grinned weakly. "I couldn't have either." "I know."

We were silent. It was a good silence. One that needed nothing more. No promises, no explanations.

He stood up, took a cup, filled it with water, drank, and handed it to me. "Take it with you," he said. I took a sip and gave it back to him. "I'll leave you the horse." He nodded. "I knew you'd walk." "A king doesn't ride when no one is waiting for him."

He laughed quietly, but it sounded genuine. "You were never king, brother." "I know." "And yet you are more so than those who try."

I picked up my bundle and threw it over my shoulder. The sun crept slowly over the horizon, its light cold but real. I turned and looked toward the camp. The men were still asleep. Only smoke rose, thin and fleeting.

I said, "Take care of her." Ubbe nodded. "And you take care of yourself?" "I'll try my best."

I started walking. Slowly, steadily. The ground was hard, frozen, and every step sounded like a soft knock on an old door. I heard nothing behind me. No shout, no farewell. Only the cracking of the earth and my breathing.

The sun warmed a little, not enough, but just enough. I headed east, toward the sea. I could already smell it, somewhere beyond the hills. That old, familiar salt hung in the air like a memory that never fades.

I didn't think much. I didn't want to either. Thinking holds you fast. Walking lets you live. I just thought: Maybe every return is just a new beginning disguised as an end.

After a few hours, I stopped and looked back. The smoke had disappeared. Only traces in the frost led to what I left behind. I smiled.

"Brotherly blood," I said quietly. "We all live off it, whether we want it or not."

Then I turned around and continued walking. Step by step. No music, no call, no sign. Just the sea, waiting somewhere ahead, patient as ever.

And when the wind came, light and cool, I heard him whisper, barely audibly: "Welcome back, Boneless."

I laughed, quietly, almost like a child. Then I walked on without looking back.

The last rush

It took three days before I saw the sea. Three days of wind, wet earth, and a sky that didn't know whether it wanted to be day or night. I walked without counting. My legs ached, but the pain was genuine. It kept me awake, kept me alive. I saw the coast first. Then the old towers. Kattegat. Or what was left of it.

I stopped and looked down. It was quiet. No boats, no smoke, no sound of hammering or shouting. Only seagulls, languid in the wind, and the sea lapping against the harbor as if trying to prove to itself that it was still there. I walked down the slope. The path was muddy, the air smelled of salt, of mold, of things forgotten for too long.

I stopped at the gate. It hung crooked, the ropes rotten, the wood cracked. I kicked it. It fell to the side like something that had long since given up. Beyond it lay Kattegat. Empty. Silent. Broken.

The houses stood, but they no longer breathed. Doors open, roofs collapsed, old barrels, broken bowls. I walked slowly, step by step. My footsteps echoed, and that was the only sound. I saw the squares where merchants once shouted, children ran, women laughed. Now there was only wind.

I came to the large square. Where blood once flowed, speeches were made, and the gods were hailed. Now it was empty. Only an old chest, half-open, and a crow sitting inside, staring at me. I stopped. It didn't fly away. It looked at me as if to say: You're late.

I said quietly, "I know."

I continued walking, through streets that were no longer streets. Everywhere, traces of life that had ended. A piece of cloth blowing in the wind, a creaking wooden wheel. I came to the hall. The large one. The one where everything began, where everything ended.

The gate was open. I entered.

Inside, it smelled of dust and salt. The table was still there, half-dilapidated, the chairs overturned as if they'd been abandoned in a hurry. I went to the table and placed my hand on the wood. It was cold. I remembered voices. Laughter. Curses. The smell of meat, beer, sweat. Now there was nothing. Only me.

I sat down on the old throne. It creaked as if it had forgotten how to carry someone. I sat there, looking into the room, which was vast and empty. No echo. No life. Only memory.

I laughed quietly. "So here I am again."

It wasn't a proud laugh. Rather, it was tired. The laugh of a man who understands the joke life is playing on him. I thought of Father. Of his words. "A king doesn't rule because he wants to. But because no one fails better." I understood that now.

I looked up at the roof, where light shone through a hole. Dust danced within, slowly, indifferently. I raised my hand as if I could grasp it. It was beautiful, but it meant nothing.

I said quietly, "Everything we build eventually becomes silent. Even the noise."

I sat there for a long time. I didn't know what I was waiting for. Maybe for voices that were no longer coming. Maybe for myself, the way I used to be—

loud, proud, crazy. But he was dead. What remained was a man who knew that fame feels like a hangover after a night you'd rather forget.

I got up and went to the fireplace. I put wood in, lit it, and lit it. The smoke slowly rose, filling the room. I watched the flames consume the old wood. The sound was familiar. It was the only thing still alive.

I sat down again and watched. I felt light. Not happy, not sad. Just light.

"The final intoxication," I said. "I guess that's what you call it when memories are warmer than the future."

I picked up the handful of ash from the ground and let it slide through my fingers. It stuck to my skin. I smelled it. It smelled of everything I was.

I closed my eyes, heard the sea outside. It beat against the stones, tirelessly. I thought: Maybe this was the gods' trick. That they made us believe we were important while they just watched us turn to dust.

I laughed again, quietly, honestly. Then I lay down on the ground, right in front of the fire. The warmth crept over me, gentle, almost friendly. I looked into the flames, and for a moment I thought I saw faces there. Old ones. Familiar ones.

I whispered, "I'm back."

And for the first time, it didn't sound like a return. It sounded like a confession.

I stayed in the hall for a long time. The fire burned quietly, the way fire burns when it no longer needs spectators. At some point, I got up and went outside. The wind had shifted. It was coming from the sea, salty, damp, old. I smelled it, and suddenly everything was there again—the smell of blood, wood, smoke, beer, sweat, salt. Everything that Kattegat once was.

I walked through the alleys, almost barefoot because the ground was soft from the night's rain. I stepped in puddles, in mud, in memories. I found traces, small things that had remained because no one wanted them. A cup, half-rusted. A piece of chain. A wooden child's doll, its face weathered, but its smile still there. I picked it up. It was light. I held it in my hand as if I were afraid it might hurt.

I remembered laughter. Games in the streets. Voices calling names that no longer existed. I laid the doll back down, carefully, as if it were asleep.

Further back, at the old blacksmith's yard, there was still a forge. Rusty, but upright. I stroked the iron, felt the cold dust. I had stood here as a child, curious, proud, full of rage. I had believed you could forge yourself if you just hit the anvil hard enough. I had to laugh. Now I knew that it only made you soft.

I found an old chest, half open, with water inside. A few coins, a dagger, a piece of cloth with Ragnar's ancient mark. I took it out and squeezed it in my hand. The cloth was hard, brittle, and smelled of everything I'd lost. I folded it and put it away. Not because I needed it, but because I couldn't leave it there.

I continued walking, reaching the shore. The boats lay there, tilted, battered, corroded by salt. I sat on one that was still half-alighted. I looked out to sea. It was calm, almost too calm. I heard nothing but the steady, patient lapping of the waves.

I thought of all the times I'd stood here. The shouts, the metal, the laughter, the fear. I thought of the men who rowed out, the ones who never came back. I thought of the lives we'd taken to prove we were alive. And I wondered if we'd ever known why.

I took a handful of sand and let it trickle through my fingers. It was coarse, wet, heavy. I said quietly, "We thought we were gods. And now we're just dust that sticks to them."

A seagull cried somewhere above me. I looked up, and for a moment I thought it was circling above me. Maybe it was. I smiled. "Stay calm, I'm dead enough already."

I stood up and walked back to the hall. The wind grew stronger. The smell of rain filled the air. I liked that. Rain smelled like cleaning. But it didn't wash anything away. Only memories.

I walked past the old houses, saw shadows in windows that were no longer windows. Sometimes I thought I heard voices. Mother. Father. Brothers. I turned around, but no one was there. Just wind blowing through wood, pretending to talk.

I returned to the spot. The fire in the hall had diminished. I went inside, added more wood, and sat down again. I felt tired. Not physically, but in the way that comes when everything gets too loud in your head.

I looked into the fire, and suddenly I was young again. I saw myself standing there, with all the rage, the greed, the pride. I heard myself screaming, laughing, threatening. I saw the others following me. And I understood: This was the rush. Not the victory, not the blood. The feeling of being needed.

I whispered, "I was never king. I was just drunk on noise."

The fire crackled, throwing sparks. One landed on my hand. I watched it vanish. No pain. Only light, brief, beautiful, useless.

I leaned back, looking into the shadows. "You won," I said quietly. "I gave you everything. And you left me what you didn't need—myself."

I closed my eyes, listening to the rain on the roof. One drop after another, steady. I breathed deeply. It smelled of wet wood, of salt, of memories.

And for a moment I thought, this is what life is: a slow, honest decay.

I found the mead in an old storage crate, half-spilled but still drinkable. The bottle was dusty, the wax on the neck cracked. I pulled the cork out with my teeth. The smell was sweet and musty, like something that refuses to go completely bad. I took a sip, then another. It barely burned. My body was too old for fire, but my mind still remembered.

I sat at the table where I used to sit, when the hall was still full of voices. I imagined they were there again. Laughter, arguments, curses. The old life. I drank, and for a moment it was there. Not as a memory, but as noise in my head, a dull echo. I heard Hvitserk laugh, heard Sigurd curse, heard Father talk—that heavy, quiet talk that always sounded as if he knew everything was failing.

I raised my cup, toasting the void. "To us idiots. They thought they were immortal."

I drank for a long time, without counting. The mead ran warmly through me, softening my thoughts. I looked into the flames, which trembled like old hands. I began to speak. Not loudly, but clearly.

"You've all abandoned me. Or I've abandoned you. I don't know anymore. It doesn't matter. In the end, everyone chases after what they're missing until they realize it doesn't even want to save them."

I laughed quietly. It was an ugly laugh. The kind you'd better not do because it hurts otherwise. I took another sip. "Father, you old fool. You wanted to make gods out of us. And I've become just a man who knows too much to believe anymore."

I looked at my hands. Old, cracked, scarred. I placed them on the table, next to the cup. I said, "These are all that remain. Two hands that learned to destroy because they never knew how to hold."

The fire cast shadows on the wall. Large, black, moving figures. For a moment, I thought they moved differently than the light. Slower. More independently. I blinked. Maybe it was the mead. Maybe not.

I said, "You're late, damn it."

The shadows didn't answer. They danced, came closer, grew smaller, grew larger, then nothing again. I grinned. "Of course you're silent. You learned it from me."

I kept drinking. The cup was empty, I refilled it. At some point, it didn't matter anymore. The taste, the amount, the time. It was all the same. Just the feeling of getting warmer, even though it was getting colder outside.

I stood up, swaying slightly, laughing. The ground spun. I went to the door and stepped out. The rain had stopped. The sea was black, shining, calm. I shouted into the darkness: "Come on! Is that all you have?"

No echo. No thunder. Just wind. I laughed again. "Cowardly gods. Whenever things get serious, you're always silent."

I went back and sat down on the ground, right in front of the fire. I drank from the bottle, the mead running down my chin. I didn't wipe it away. I stared into the embers, which slowly diminished.

I said, "I loved you. Every single one of you. And I hated you because you showed me that love always comes at a price."

I leaned my head against the table. I was tired. But my head was full. Images, voices, sounds. I saw Father looking up at the sky. I saw Mother smiling, that smile that was stronger than any axe. I saw my brothers, all of them, young, loud, beautiful. I saw myself, in the middle of it all, with eyes that thought they knew what life was.

I muttered, "We were never heroes. We were just men afraid of being ordinary."

I drank the rest and put the bottle down. It fell over, rolled slowly away, and clattered against the floor. I watched it. The sound was the last thing that made sense.

I lay down, directly on the ground. The ground was cool, my head heavy. I closed my eyes, listening to the sea outside, quiet, steady.

I whispered, "The final rush... it doesn't taste like victory. Only like peace, which one doesn't deserve."

Then I laughed quietly, almost friendly, and the fire was the only thing that responded.

I woke up with the taste of ash in my mouth. My head was pounding, my tongue dry as leather. I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was the fire, no longer burning. Only embers, sluggish and weak, like a heart that has forgotten what it beats for. The smoke still hung in the air, sweet and old. I sat up, slowly, because everything inside me resisted it.

The hall was silent. The light fell through the cracks in the roof, cold, almost white. Dust danced in it, as if it had forgotten it was dirt. I looked around. The cup lay overturned, the bottle empty, the wood sticky. I laughed quietly. "Always the same drama," I murmured.

I rubbed my face, my skin rough, my hands shaking. I felt old, older than yesterday, older than I was. I thought about that evening. The voices, the shadows, the laughter. I wondered if I had really spoken or just dreamed. I didn't know. Maybe it didn't matter. Dreams and memories smell the same when you're old enough.

I stood up and walked to the door. The floor crunched beneath my footsteps. It was light outside. The sea lay calm, pale blue, with that indifference that only water has. I stepped outside, shivering a little. The wind was cool but clear. I took a deep breath. It burned in my chest, but it felt good.

I walked to the shore. The waves were small, rolling gently over the stones. I bent down, took some water in my hand, and washed my face. The salt burned my eyes, waking me more than any prayer. I stayed like that, my hands in the water, my head bowed. I said quietly, "I'm still here."

It wasn't a request, nor a thank you. Just a statement.

I looked out to sea, and for a split second I thought I saw something. Movement. A shadow, perhaps. A boat. Maybe just the memory of one. I blinked, it was gone. I smiled. "Of course."

I sat down on a rock. The sun rose higher. I looked at my hands, those old, trembling tools that had held too much and preserved too little. I thought of all the people I had lost. Not their faces, but their sounds. The laughter, the breathing, the screaming. Sounds last longer than love.

I felt sober. Not in my body, but in my head. The kind of sobriety that's worse than drunkenness because it forces you to see everything. No filter, no fire, no intoxication. Just what's there—and what's missing.

I whispered, "Maybe this is grace—when there's nothing left for you to sugarcoat."

I looked back at the hall. The wood gleamed in the light, as if trying to justify itself. I grinned. "You're right. It was never your fault."

I stood up and walked back, slowly. The floor was damp, the air clear. I stepped back into the hall. The smell of smoke and old wood greeted me like a memory I can't shake. I sat on the edge of the table and looked at the embers, which were barely smoldering.

I picked up a piece of charred wood and turned it over in my hand. Black fingers, black wood, black thoughts. I said, "I thought the high was the problem. But it was always the sobriety afterward."

I was calm. No anger, no pain. Just this clear, cold peace. I suddenly understood that this was the end. Not because I had to die, but because there was nothing afterward worth destroying.

I stood up and put the piece of wood back on the fire. It smoked, hissed, and fell apart. I smiled. "Everything turns to dust eventually. Even intoxication."

I stepped outside and let my gaze wander over Kattegat once more. The sun was now high. The sea glittered as if mocking me. I said quietly, "I know. You stay. I'm going."

Then I turned around and started walking. No plan, no goal. Just the thought that movement was the last form of life I had left.

And as I walked, I knew that clarity isn't a gift. It's just the final rush when everything else runs dry.

I walked until the ground became soft again. The land passed by, quiet, indifferent. Old fields, overgrown, fences rotting, ditches full of water. The sun was slanting, the light yellowish, the kind that makes everything look old. I had no idea where I was going. I just wanted to walk. My body was heavy, but my head was light.

I stopped thinking about Kattegat. It was behind me, and I left it there. I didn't think about anything in particular. About sounds. About silence. About the feeling when you stop searching. I saw birds in the distance, small dots moving as if they knew where to go. I didn't envy them.

Sometimes I stopped and looked at the sea. It was always there. Steady. Like a heart that doesn't know you're dead. I heard the water, and it sounded peaceful. I thought: Maybe death is like this. No end. Just this steady beating that eventually lulls you to sleep.

I found an old tree, half dead, half alive. I leaned against it, slowly sliding down until I was sitting. I breathed deeply. The air smelled of earth, moist and real. I laid my head back, looking up at the sky through the branches.

I said quietly, "You're late, old friend."

I knew he was there. Not as a shadow, not as a figure. Just as a feeling. I had felt him for a long time. In every winter, every battle, every pain. He was never an enemy. He was an observer. Patient. He waited until you stopped running.

I closed my eyes. The sun warmed my face. I heard nothing but the wind. I said, "I used to hate you. Because you took everything from me. But now I understand. You're only giving back what I've lost."

I laughed quietly. "Maybe you're the only one who stayed honest."

I stayed like that. For a while, maybe an hour, maybe more. Time was just noise. I didn't feel sad, not happy. Just calm. I thought of all the men I'd seen fall, the women I hadn't held, the blood I'd shed, the gods I'd cried out to. And I realized: I don't regret any of it. I only regret believing it should mean more.

I opened my eyes and looked into the distance. The sea was visible, a strip of silver, still and vast. I whispered, "If you want me, take me. But do it quietly."

Nothing happened. Not a gust of wind, not a sign. Just the same calm breathing of the world. I smiled. "Of course. You're never in a hurry."

I stood up, slowly, groping for the tree to keep my balance. I felt light. Not weak. Just empty of everything that no longer mattered. I continued walking, step by step, my eyes forward.

The sky grew paler, the light softer. I didn't know whether I was heading west or north. I only knew that every step was right, as long as it didn't lead backward.

I said, "I'm not fighting you anymore."

The wind blew gently, playing with the grass as if to answer. I nodded. "I know. You were never my enemy."

I kept walking until evening came. The sky turned red, then purple, then black. I found a hill and lay down. No fire, no shelter. Only the sky above me. I saw the stars, pale and distant.

I said quietly, "You've followed me for a long time, old friend. But now you walk beside me."

I closed my eyes, smiled, and for the first time I no longer felt like I was being followed.

I had arrived—not somewhere, but finally at myself.

I don't know when I fell asleep. Maybe I was awake and just didn't realize it. The sky was dark, the stars looked as if they were watching me. I lay there, my back in the damp earth, my eyes half-open. Then the sea came closer. Not the sound, just the water itself. It was suddenly there, shimmering, calm, and I felt sand beneath me, no longer grass.

I sat up. The wind was warm. That was the first thing that was different. No frost, no bite. Just this soft air that felt like memories. I looked around. The beach was empty. Then I heard them. Voices.

I stood up. There they were. Three figures. First shadows, then clearer. Hvitserk laughed, as he always laughed—loudly, for no reason. Sigurd stood beside him, arms crossed, his face calm, but with that old mockery in his eyes. And Father... Father stood a little further back, his hands behind his back, as always when he knew I was coming.

I approached her, slowly, almost suspiciously. Hvitserk grinned. "Well, look at that. The Boneless One can still walk." I grinned back. "I took my time." "As always."

Sigurd stepped closer. "Did you think you'd get here without us noticing?" I laughed. "I was hoping you'd be too busy being dead." He shook his head. "You won't get rid of us that easily, brother."

I stopped, a few steps away. I looked at them, those faces I had so often hated, missed, and forgotten. It was as if something inside me fell silent. Not peace. More like recognition.

Father came closer. He looked older, but also softer. I said, "I thought you were in Valhalla." He smiled. "Maybe. Maybe this is Valhalla. Maybe it's just your head. What does it matter?" I nodded. "None."

He put his hand on my shoulder. It felt real. Warm. Heavy. "It took you a long time to get here." "I wanted to make sure it was worth it." He nodded. "And?" "I don't know yet."

Hvitserk laughed and hugged me. "You know. You just don't want to say it." I laughed along. It felt like it used to. Dirty, honest, loud. I smelled the smoke, the sea, the old life. I said, "I've missed you." "We missed you too," Sigurd said. "But you were always too proud to admit it." "I still am." "We know that."

Father looked out to sea. "Everything you were looking for was never out there." I looked at him. "I know. But I had to lose it to see it." He nodded, satisfied. "Then you've finally learned what men never want to learn."

I turned around. The beach had become bright. The sun was rising, but differently. No day, no morning. Only light. Warm, golden, endless. I said, "Is this the end?" Hvitserk grinned. "It's what you make of it." Sigurd placed his hand on my chest. "It never ends, brother. It just changes the beat." I laughed. "That sounds like you." "Because it's me."

Father slowly walked back to the water. I followed him. He stopped and turned around. "You can stay or you can go. Both are right. Both are wrong." I nodded. "As always." "As always."

He stepped into the water. It absorbed him, silently, without waves, without resistance. Hvitserk and Sigurd followed, smiling. I stopped. I watched them. No pain, no fear. Just this gentle tug, like a rope being released.

I said, "Wait for me." Hvitserk turned around. "We never stopped."

Then the light was too strong. I blinked, and everything dissolved. Water, sand, voices, everything. Only the sea remained. Always the sea.

I woke up. It was still night. The wind had died down. I lay there, looking up at the stars. I said quietly, "I know. Soon."

I closed my eyes again. And the dream remained, like a hand on my shoulder.

Morning came quietly. No wind, no birds, no sound. Only the sea, breathing. I opened my eyes, slowly, as if I were afraid the dream was still there. But it was gone. Only silence remained—the good kind of silence, the one that no longer oppresses you. I sat up. The sky was bright, cloudless, with a faint gold rim. I looked at it and thought, this is what peace must look like when it finally gives up hiding.

I stood up, slowly. My knees creaked, my back hurt, but that didn't bother me. I felt light. Different than usual. Not young, not strong, just... whole. I walked down to the sea. The water was still, almost transparent. I saw my reflection. Old, tired, but real. No more lies in it. No anger. No hunger. Just me.

I bent down, dipped my hands in the water, and washed my face. It was cold, but it felt good. I looked out. Far out, beyond the line of light, I thought I saw something. Maybe boats. Maybe nothing. I nodded. "I know. Not yet."

I sat on a rock and watched the waves. I thought about everything. Father. Mother. Brothers. Battles. Blood. Cities. Gods. Women. Everything I had done, everything I had lost. It was as if I were leafing through an old book I had written myself, but had never understood. I smiled.

I said quietly, "I tried to be immortal. But this... this is more honest."

I pulled the piece of cloth from my pocket, the one with Ragnar's ancient mark. I unfolded it and placed it on the stone next to me. The wind stirred it, barely noticeable. It looked as if it were breathing. I said, "I carried it as best I could."

Then I leaned back and looked up at the sky. The sun was higher now, warming my face. I closed my eyes. I thought of Hvitserk, of his laughter. I thought of Sigurd, of his anger. I thought of Father saying, "There is no end. Only directions." I understood now.

I said quietly, "I'm tired, but not broken."

The sea gently lapped against the rocks. I felt the rhythm within me, calm, steady. I breathed deeply, felt the salt in the air, the burning in my chest. I knew I didn't have much time left. But for the first time, it didn't bother me. I had no fear. No anger. Just this quiet, honest peace.

I sat like that for a long time. Maybe hours. The sun was high, the sea shimmered. I thought: If they find me, they should find me like this—still, awake, and smiling.

I whispered, "The final intoxication isn't drinking. It's ceasing to be thirsty."

Then I lay down and closed my eyes. The wind brushed my face. It smelled of salt, of wood, of life. I heard the sea. And somewhere in it, ever so faintly, I thought I heard their voices again.

I smiled and let go.

In the arms of darkness

It wasn't the death I had imagined. No scream, no pain, no black hole swallowing you whole. It was more like someone twisted the weight off. The heaviness simply fell away, quietly, like dust from an old blanket. I lay there, and the sea continued to breathe, evenly, as if it knew what to do. I heard my heart slow, calm, not fighting. There was no fight left.

The darkness didn't come from outside. It came from within, gentle, warm, understanding. I felt the world slipping away. Not a crack, not a break—more of a farewell that both sides had long since understood. I thought of the body I left behind. Of the scars, the bones that had betrayed me and yet had carried me, longer than they needed to. I said quietly, "Thank you."

I saw nothing, and yet there was light. Not the light people always talk about when they hope things will be beautiful. No sky, no gods, no harps. Just a quiet glow, somewhere far away. Like a fire that's been burning for a long time and recognizes you. I walked toward it, without feet, without direction, just onward.

I thought I'd be afraid. But there wasn't. Only curiosity. A tired, friendly curiosity, like an old man who wants to know if anyone is still awake. I felt everything stretching, boundaries softening. I was no longer Ivar, no longer

Boneless, no longer son, brother, king, cripple. I was only what remains when names cease to matter.

Then the sea returned. I was no longer on the shore, but in the water. It carried me, calmly, steadily. I couldn't sink. I couldn't swim. I was simply part of it. I didn't hear any voices, but I knew they were there. Hvitserk, Sigurd, Father. Everyone I had lost. They didn't talk, they waited.

I thought: Maybe that's the trick. Death doesn't take your life. It just takes away your attempt to hold on to it.

I glided on. No pain. No thought. Only movement. I saw the light again, larger now, and it wasn't blinding, not overwhelming. It was familiar. I thought I'd seen it before. Maybe in the fire, maybe in my mother's eyes when I was a child.

I said quietly, "I'm coming."

And there was a feeling as if the darkness was embracing you, not to swallow you, but to hold you. Warm. Protective. Full of everything you've ever lacked.

I suddenly understood why the old people were never afraid. Because there was nothing to run from. Everything that had ever been was there—just at rest. No guilt. No anger. No why. Just being.

I smiled. I felt light. And somewhere, far in the distance, I heard Father laughing. Not loudly, not mockingly. More like proudly.

Then everything was quiet. And finally, after all these years, I was no longer tired.

I don't know how much time passed. Maybe none. Maybe all of it. But at some point, I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was fire. Not a hot, burning fire, but this soft, yellow light, breathing, as if it had no reason to brighten. I was sitting on the beach. The sand was warm, the sea calm. No waves, no spray, just water, barely moving, as if it wanted to listen.

I looked around. Three figures were sitting there, near the fire. They weren't talking, they were drinking. One looked up, grinned, and raised his cup. Hvitserk. He looked the same as always—a little too loud for the silence. "Well, finally," he said. "I guess you thought you could keep us waiting forever."

I stood up and walked over to them. The sand was soft, every step felt light. Sigurd sat next to him, his gaze fixed on the sea. He looked older, calmer. I nodded to him. He nodded back. No words needed.

I sat down. Father sat across from me, cup in hand, his face in the light. He smiled. No pride, no judgment. Just that calm, knowing smile that said it all. I reached for a cup. It was there. Full. I drank. It tasted of mead, of salt, of memory.

"So?" asked Hvitserk. "How was it?" I grinned. "Like a hangover that lasts too long." He laughed. "That suits you."

Sigurd looked at me. "You've grown old." "And you're still an ass." He grinned. "It's a good thing some things don't change."

We all laughed. Long, honest, for no reason. No triumph, no pathos. Just that laughter that comes when you're finally sitting among people who know you again.

The fire crackled softly. No one spoke anymore. We looked out at the sea, which barely moved. I asked, "Is this Valhalla?" Father shook his head. "If you need it, yes. If not, fine too." "So it doesn't matter." "Everything doesn't matter at some point, son. That's the beauty of it."

I nodded. "And what do you do here?" Hvitserk drank. "You wait until you don't have to anymore." I grinned. "And how long does that take?" Sigurd looked into the fire. "Until you stop looking for answers."

I understood immediately. I leaned back, braced myself with my hands, and looked up at the sky. There were stars, but they weren't made of light. They seemed made of memory, shining softly and familiarly. I searched for my place among them, found it without knowing where.

Father looked at me. "You lived well." I laughed. "I destroyed more than I built." "That's part of it. The gods are just better destroyers, too." "And they laugh about it." "Of course. It's their way of praying."

I took another sip and looked into the fire. The light reflected off the mead. I said quietly, "I thought it would be worse." Father smiled. "Everyone thinks that."

For a while, no one spoke. Only the sea breathed. I thought about the time we had lost. About what remained. I looked at my brothers, my father, the fire, the

sea. And I understood: It had never been about fame. Never about power, gods, or fate. It had always been about this. Sitting. The silence. The knowledge that you are no longer alone.

I said, "I don't want to go back." Father nodded. "No one is sending you." "And if I stay?" "Then stay. But stay properly."

I understood what he meant. No regrets. No looking back. Just being. Finally, simply being.

Hvitserk stood up and walked to the sea. The water touched his feet, but he didn't sink. He turned around. "Come, brother. It's warm." I stood up and walked to him. The water was smooth, almost solid, like glass. I stepped in. It felt like breathing.

"And now?" I asked. Sigurd exclaimed, "Nothing now. That's the best part."

I laughed. It was the most honest laugh of my life. Then I turned to Father. He nodded. "Now you know what peace is."

I stood there, the sea up to my knees, the fire behind me, the light before me. No more weight, no more pain, no more anger. Only one feeling: arrival.

I said quietly, "I'm home."

We sat where the sea touched the sky, and time ceased to matter. No one asked how long we'd been there. There was no yesterday, no tomorrow, no direction, only this soft now, which felt like sleep after too many years of being awake.

Hvitserk lay on his back, arms behind his head, grinning at the sky. "I always knew you'd come here. I just didn't know how long it would take." I nodded. "Me neither. I thought I could do it without you." "No one can do it without anyone."

Sigurd sat by the fire, carving a piece of driftwood with a knife, even though there were no splinters left. He just did it because he always had. The rhythm was soothing, steady. I heard the knife cutting, like an old song.

Father sat at the edge of the water, looking out where the light began. He didn't drink, didn't talk, he was simply there. It was strange to see him so still. Before, he was always movement, storm, will. Now he was calm. I thought, perhaps this was the greatest victory: to stay without wanting anything.

I said quietly, "It doesn't feel like heaven." Father looked at me. "It isn't. Heaven is just the word for what humans don't understand." "And what is this?" "What's left when you stop fighting."

I nodded. I understood. Not with my head, but with what was still alive inside me.

Hvitserk had fallen asleep. He was snoring softly, peacefully, as if he'd never been young. Sigurd was still with the wood, but more slowly, as if he himself were disappearing, piece by piece, with each cut. I watched him, and for the first time in years, I felt nothing that hurt.

I saw my hands. No more scars. No more shaking. They looked like they did back when I thought they could hold the world. I moved them, just to make sure they were real. They were. And yet, it meant nothing. Not anymore.

I said, "We screamed so much, saw so much blood. And for what?" Father didn't answer immediately. Then he said, "For the right to remain silent at the end." I grinned. "That sounds like you." "I know."

We all looked into the fire. It burned no brighter, no darker. It was simple. And I thought: Maybe that's the meaning of it all—to simply be, without reason, without purpose, without an audience.

Sigurd put the knife aside. "Do you know what I've been missing?" "What?" "This." He gestured. "So that no one wants anything anymore." I nodded. "Yes. That's new." "And good." "Yes. Good."

Hvitserk mumbled something unintelligible in his sleep, grinning. I laughed softly. Father looked at him, smiled, and shook his head. "He never changed." "Fortunately," I said. "One of us had to stay alive."

The sea barely moved. The sky was vast, still, colorless. Everything was the same, and yet everything was alive. No heaviness, no pressure, no purpose. I understood that eternity doesn't mean that something lasts forever, but that nothing ends.

I stood up and walked to the water. It reached my ankles. I looked at the surface, which was smooth as glass. My reflection looked back. Not a king. Not a warrior. Just a man who had finally stopped punishing himself. I smiled at him.

"You look better than I thought," I said.

Father came behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Now you know what peace is." "Yes," I said. "Now I know." "Then stay here." "Where else would I go?" He nodded. "Nowhere. That's the point."

I looked out, and suddenly I understood: the sea wasn't a place. It was a memory. And we were sitting in it, as one sits within oneself when everything is over.

I whispered, "The last rush was life." Father replied, "And this is sleeping in."

We both laughed. Quietly, tiredly, contentedly.

Then I sat down again by the fire, between my brothers. No one spoke. No one had to.

The silence was full. And for the first time, I felt like I belonged.

There was no end, just a slow fade. Like smoke dissipating in the morning light, without drama, without haste. We sat by the fire for a while. I didn't know how long. Time meant nothing here. It was like a word you'd forgotten because you no longer needed it.

Hvitserk had gotten up and was walking barefoot along the shore. He let his hands glide through the water, sometimes laughing quietly, for no reason at all. Sigurd had stopped carving. The piece of wood lay beside him, half-finished, but complete. Father looked into the distance, where the sea and the sky met. I looked at him and knew he was waiting for me.

I said, "Will we be remembered?" He didn't answer immediately. Then he said, "Only as long as it's necessary." "And then?" "Then they'll forget you. And that's a good thing." I nodded. "I always thought memory was immortality." "It is," he said. "But immortality isn't a gift. It's a weight."

I understood that. I thought of all the names written on walls, told in stories, sung in songs. I thought of how they all eventually became meaningless. Just sound, just dust in the throats of those who repeated them. And I felt how easy it was when you finally let it go.

"Then they should forget," I said. "They will," said Father. "But they'll still miss you, without knowing why."

The fire burned smaller. No end, no extinguishing, only that gentle exhalation when there's nothing left to burn. I watched as the flames grew fainter, as the light faded into the sand. I added another piece of wood, not out of necessity, but out of habit. It crackled, briefly, lively, then silent.

I said, "I always thought life was loud." Father smiled. "Only for those who need to listen."

Hvitserk came back and sat down next to me. "I've seen death," he said. "He looks like us when we laugh." I grinned. "Then at least he has taste." Sigurd laughed softly. "Always cynical, to the end." "That's what kept me alive." "And now?" "Now it can finally let me go."

The sky began to glow. Not a sunrise, not a fire, just light. It came from everywhere. Soft. Friendly. It settled over us like warm hands. The sea shimmered, and I knew: It was time.

I stood up. My body was light, almost transparent. I looked at the others. Father nodded. "Go ahead." "Are you coming?" "I'm already here."

I stepped to the water. It was calm, smooth, almost mirror-like. I saw myself once more. No king, no cripple, no name. Just a face smiling because it finally wanted nothing more.

I said, "I was never holy." The sea responded with a slight twitch, like a nod.

I turned around and saw them once more. Father, Sigurd, Hvitserk. They sat in the light, and I knew they would stay until I, too, was forgotten. I raised my hand, a final greeting, not out of pain, but out of gratitude.

Then I entered the water. Step by step. No resistance. No cold. Only warmth that absorbs you without asking who you were. I saw the light, bigger now, softer. I entered.

And as I disappeared, I thought: Maybe that's the point—not to stay, but to walk quietly enough that no one gets scared.

The sea closed. No trace. No sound. Only water, breathing.

And somewhere, far in the back, someone was laughing.

The sea was still, as if it had swallowed something too important to spit out. Only the fire remained. Small, weak, but alive. The wind blew across the beach,

taking sand with it, leaving fleeting traces that immediately disappeared again. No voice, no footstep, no shadow. Only this silence, which spoke louder than words.

There was nothing where Ivar had sat. No bone, no cloak, no trace. Only the piece of cloth with Ragnar's old mark, half in the sand, half in the light. The wind played with it, lifted it, dropped it, again and again, as if deciding whether to take it with him. In the end, it left it there.

The sea shimmered, but not loudly. It moved as one breathes when one is asleep. No waves, no roar. Just a steady flow, as if it knew that silence is life's last companion.

The sun was low or high, you couldn't tell. Time was meaningless. The light was soft, golden, and everything seemed suspended within it. The fire was almost out, but in its last embers lay something you could almost call warmth.

Hvitserk was still sitting there. Not a word, not a sound. He looked out at the sea. Sigurd lay in the sand, his eyes closed, as if he had become part of it. Father stood in the water, which reached up to his waist. He didn't move.

He looked out, to where the light ended, and said quietly, almost inaudibly: "He did it."

Hvitserk nodded. No smile, no pride. Just that nod men give when there's nothing left to prove.

Father went a little deeper into the water until it completely surrounded him. No bubbles, no splashing. Just water closing again. The surface was smooth. Sigurd opened his eyes briefly, saw it, and closed them again.

Hvitserk stood up, walked over to the fire, took a step closer, and looked into the embers. He picked up the piece of cloth from the sand and saw the symbol on it. A shattered legacy that still held meaning, even though there was no one left to carry it. He placed it in the embers. It burned slowly, quietly, evenly. No smoke. Only light.

He said, "So be it."

Then he turned around and walked along the bank, barefoot, until the light took him. No end, no transition. Only disappearance, like breath in the cold.

What remained was the beach, the sea, the fire.

And for a moment, just briefly, the water moved differently. Like a waving hand. Then everything was calm again.

Only the darkness remained, and it smelled of salt, of life, of peace.

I remember him. Not the way people remember—not in faces, not in dates. I remember sounds. The sound of his footsteps on wet wood, the soft hiss of blood falling on snow. I remember his laughter, which came rarely but was like lightning when it appeared. I remember his rage, that fire that never stopped burning, even when there was nothing left to warm him.

I was always there, even when he didn't want me to be. I am what remains when men like him disappear. I dwell in the things they touch, in the words they speak, in the looks they leave behind. I am what lives on when no one asks anymore.

Some call me history, others myth, a few say a lie. I don't call myself anything at all. I simply am. I stay as long as someone whispers. I change, like water shapes when you pour it into other hands. And Ivar—he was one of those waves. Short, strong, loud, then silent. But I still feel him. In every man who stands up even though he should fall. In every woman who loves even though she knows it hurts.

I remember the coldness in his eyes, which was never evil, only honest. He saw the world as it was, and that made him dangerous. People don't like mirrors that show them what they are. They call them monsters. But I know better. I've seen many. And none was uglier than fear.

I remember the sea that took him. It was calm that day, as if even nature had grown weary of war. I remember the fire that burned, though no one was cold anymore. I remember the cloth that turned to ash and the wind that carried it, like something too light to be forgotten.

I remember his last words. Not because they were loud, but because they were quiet. "I was never holy," he said. And there was more holiness in that honesty than in all the temples of the gods.

I remember because I must. It's my curse, my gift, my purpose. I hold on until there's nothing left to hold on to. Then I let go. And even letting go is remembered.

They say he's gone. But I know he's not leaving. He wanders. Through dreams, through stories, through tongues that no longer know his name but still feel his

way of life. He's there when someone laughs, even though there's no reason. When someone stands up, even though everyone says: Stay down.

I remember Ivar. I remember every bone, every scar, every flaw. And I remember that he smiled at the end.

That's enough.

Because life doesn't demand more – and memories even less.

In the end, only the sea remained. No fire, no wind, no sound. Only water, moving as if it were the breath of the world itself. It smelled of salt and time. The sky was empty, without stars, without sun, just this soft gray that knows no end and no beginning.

I—the memory—was still there. But I became quieter. Every thought of him dissolved a little further into the water. No pain, no loss. Just this slow, dignified fading, like smoke that knows it's no longer needed.

The places he walked closed. Paths turned to earth, tracks to sand. His name, once heavy as iron, became light. Then nothing. And that was good. That was right.

The darkness didn't come with force, it came with calm. It settled over the sea, over the beach, over everything. No threatening sound, no pressure. Only silence, spreading like sleep. The kind of sleep after which there's no need to wake up.

The sea took me in, just as it had taken him. There was no longer any distinction between water and memory. I became soft, transparent, nameless. And in this state, I finally understood what peace means: the end of any need to cling.

The world kept turning. Somewhere, someone would laugh, someone would cry, someone would fight. Somewhere, blood would drip into the snow again, someone would scream, someone would love. I wouldn't be there to see it. But a spark of it would sustain me. That was enough.

I continued to detach myself. First the images disappeared, then the voices, then the language itself. Nothing remained that could be described. Only feeling. And the feeling said: "It's good."

The sea glided on, languidly, evenly. No turmoil, no storm. Everything was in balance. No victory, no loss, no guilt. Only Being.

And then I too was silent. No memory, no name, no sound. Only darkness.

But it was a good darkness. Warm. Patient. Free.

And somewhere, far away, barely more than a whisper, lay a final laugh.

It sounded like Ivar. Like life. Like peace.

Then that was over too.

And the world continued to breathe.

The Betrayal of Silence

The news came on the wind. No messenger, no letter, no sign in the sky—only this whisper that drifted through the halls, through villages, across fields, along the coasts, until even the quietest people realized something was missing. No one said the name first. It was as if doing so would bring him too much into the present. So they remained silent. And therein lay the betrayal.

They acted as if they didn't know. As if he were somewhere, on the move, once again on one of his marches into the void. Some said they had seen him in a dream, barefoot on the beach, gazing out to sea. Others swore they had heard the sound of his voice one night, brief, like a call to be forgotten before it took on meaning.

Kattegat was no longer as it once was. The city breathed slowly, laboriously, like a body that had lost its heart. New faces moved in, new names, new songs. But the old stones remembered. The wood of the halls creaked in the wind, as if it still wanted to speak. And when the rain fell at night, it sounded as if old stories were being wept.

Ubbe returned one morning. Not as a warrior, not as a brother. Just as a man. The years had lowered his shoulders, but cleared his gaze. He looked out to sea, stood for a long time where they had once played as children. The sand was the same, only the footprints were missing.

"I know you made it, brother," he said quietly. No prayer, no remembrance. Just one sentence that stuck.

He went into the hall. The smoke had long since disappeared, the dust had settled. He smelled of time, of wood, of memories. He sat down at the same table where they used to sit, took a cup, and filled it with water from an old jug. No mead, no wine. Just water. Clear, cold, honest.

He raised his cup and looked up into the air. "To the one who finally fell silent."

He drank, slowly, with his eyes closed. Then he put the cup down, and the sound was the only thing that could be heard. It sounded like a full stop.

He stayed seated until the sun was higher in the sky. Then he stood up and walked out. He didn't turn around on the way. Some later said he smiled. Others said he cried. No one knew. Perhaps it was both.

The sea was silent. So was the city. But in this silence was something alive. Something that could not be tamed.

Sometimes, when the wind blew from the north, it brought with it an echo. A laugh, deep, short, free. No haunting, no ghost. Only a memory that couldn't completely erase itself.

And people said, "That's him."

Then they looked at each other and no one objected.

Ubbe stayed in Kattegat. Not because he had to, but because no one else knew how to stay. The city had grown older, tired of all the kings who came and went. The walls of the great hall were cold, the roof leaked, and at night the wind sang between the beams like an old friend who hadn't been able to say goodbye.

He often went to the harbor where the ships lay, half-rotted, half-forgotten. Some ropes were still attached, others hung loose, as if waiting for hands to pull them back. The sea was calm these days. No storm, no shout. Just this endless expanse that knew everything and said nothing.

Ubbe stopped on the bank, leaned on his knees, and looked down into the water. He saw his face in it, older, quieter. And behind him, he sometimes thought he saw a second figure—not clear, only vaguely indicated. Broad

shoulders, cold eyes, a smile that apologized for nothing. When he blinked, it was gone again.

He didn't speak out loud, but he often thought: *You're here. I know it.*

In the village, people hardly spoke about Ivar anymore. Too many years, too many stories. Everyone had their own version, and none of them were true. But all of them together created one feeling—and that was enough. They told how he died without pain. That he fell upright. That he laughed. That he fell silent at the last moment, and the sky remained dark, as if even Odin had hesitated.

Ubbe heard them, but said nothing. He knew that stories die the way people live—with contradiction, pride, and silence. But on some nights, when the moon fell on the sea, he heard a faint beating. Not a heart, not a drumbeat. Something deeper. As if the water itself were breathing, to remember a man who had never learned to stand still.

One day, Ubbe went up to the old hill, where blood once flowed and the screams of the victims rose to the heavens. Today, grass grew there, quiet and soft. He sat down, took a handful of earth, and let it trickle through his fingers.

"You're not missing," he said. "But you're not gone."

The wind didn't answer. It didn't need to. It blew through his hair, and that was answer enough.

Ubbe stayed there until the sun set. He thought not of fame, nor of legends, nor of resting places. Only of what was—two brothers who had broken the world in their own way. One through fire, the other through patience.

He stood up, dusted his hands, and looked out over the sea, which was slowly falling into darkness.

"You were right," he murmured. "The war never ends. It just gets quieter."

Then he walked back to the city. No fanfare, no song, no prayer. Just footsteps in the dust, steady, honest.

And when night came, Kattegat was silent again. But in that silence lay a heartbeat, barely audible, like the remnant of a dream no one could forget.

Years passed. The faces changed, the voices, the names. New children ran through Kattegat, barefoot, with swollen knees and the same wild eyes the brothers had once worn. They knew nothing of Ivar, not really. They only knew stories their parents told when the fire burned deep and the wind pressed against the walls.

Said:*There was once a man who couldn't walk, but made everyone run.*

Or:*He was cruel, but just.*

Or:*He was the son of a storm, and the storm never left him.*

The children laughed about it. They played, fought, and called each other "Ivar" when someone was particularly brave or stubborn. It was a game to them, a sound, not a name anymore. But there was more truth in these games than they realized.

At night, when the rain came and the sea crashed against the cliffs, they sometimes heard sounds no one could explain. A distant knocking, a shout, a laughter brought and carried away by the wind. They asked their parents, and they simply said:*This is the sea. It speaks to itself.*

But the old people knew better.

Some of them still went to the hill. They sat there in the cold, looking at the water. No offerings, no prayers, just sitting in silence. And sometimes they swore they saw a figure in the mist, far out where the sky kisses the sea. Small, but upright.

Ubbe saw her once, many years after his first visit. He had grown old, his beard gray, his gaze calm. He stood in the same spot as before, and the sea was calm again. He looked out and whispered, "Still here."

Behind him, children laughed. They chased each other across the beach, shouting to each other, falling, getting up again. One fell into the water, screamed, and kept laughing. Ubbe smiled. That was life. That's how it had to be.

He turned around and walked back into town. The children didn't follow him. They were too busy playing, too busy becoming themselves. But something smoldered inside each of them—that little restlessness, that quiet burning that knows no peace.

Ivar's legacy had never been blood or glory. It was movement. The defiance of everything that meant stagnation.

The world forgot his name. And therein lay the betrayal. For silence doesn't extinguish a flame—it makes it invisible.

And so it continued to burn, somewhere beneath the skin of those who believed they had long since lived in peace.

Ubbe walked through Kattegat one last time. No destination, no farewell party, no witnesses. Only footsteps on wet wood, the creaking of old doors, the smell of smoke and salt. He paused briefly at every corner, as if checking if anything from the past still breathed. The smithy was silent, the hall empty. No sword left on the walls, no coat of arms, no fire. Only light falling through broken boards, dust dancing within it like memory.

He sat down at the same table he'd sat at as a boy. The bench creaked, as if it still knew who sat there. He placed his hands on the tabletop, feeling the notches, the blows, the wood that had seen more than all those who built it. He whispered, "I was there, brother. And I understood."

He stayed like that for a while. Then he stood up, walked out, across the courtyard, past the empty stables, down to the harbor. There lay boats, old, rotten, worn by the wind. None of them capable of weathering the storm. But he didn't need a storm anymore. Only the sea.

He looked out. The water was calm, but beneath the surface, something was moving. Not fish, not wind, something else. A hunch. A heartbeat. He picked up a stone and threw it in. The impact was quiet. Just a circle that spread out, bigger, bigger, then disappeared again.

"That's good," he said.

He walked up the path to the hill, to where the grass lay in the wind, flat, soft, unruffled. The sky was gray, a quiet gray that didn't threaten, but simply was. He sat down.

Down in the village, children began to scream and laugh. One sang a song no one had taught him. It was raw, loud, beautiful. Ubbe smiled. Maybe that was it. No monument, no statues. Just songs no one knows where they came from.

He lay back in the grass and looked up at the sky. He thought of Ivar, of his brothers, of his father, of his mother. Of all the dead who still lay in the earth. Then he thought of the living. And he realized there was no difference anymore.

He said, "You stay, even if you leave."

The wind blew over him as if it had heard that. No sign, no whisper, no divine moment. Just that quiet rustling you hear when the world is content.

He stood up, dusted his hands. "I'm going now," he said. Not to anyone. Just to the air. Then he walked down to the sea, slowly, step by step, like a man who no longer needs to hurry.

He climbed into a small boat, untied the rope, and pushed off. The water carried him, calmly, patiently. He didn't row far. Only to where the shore narrowed. Then he laid down his oars and looked into the distance.

He whispered, "I heard you, brother."

Then he closed his eyes.

The boat drifted on. No wind, no sound. Only the sea carrying him.

And in Kattegat, between the huts, the wood, the salt, silence remained. Not a cold silence. A warm one. That which remains when words would be too much.

Night came without color. No blue, no black, no transition. It simply fell over Kattegat, as if it had always been there, just taking a brief pause. The wind blew up from the sea, heavy with salt, and settled over roofs, boats, and fields. The waves barely moved. Only the quiet beating against the wood, steady, like a heart that continues to beat even though the body has long since rested.

A few lights burned in the village. Dim, subdued, like memories too tired to be bright. People hardly talked about him anymore, but he was in their movements. In the way they closed their doors, the way they glanced briefly into the air during meals, as if searching for something that was long gone.

An old fisherman sat on the dock, his legs above the water. He chewed on a piece of wood, as he always did when he was thinking. "The Boneless One," he murmured. Then he laughed quietly, but without mockery. It sounded more like respect. "The one who didn't sink."

His grandson, a boy with bright eyes, asked, "Was he a hero?" The old man considered. "No. He was real." "What does that mean?" "That he didn't do what was expected." The boy nodded, not understanding, but that didn't matter. Some truths don't need understanding, only silence.

The wind picked up again, carrying the smell of wet wood and fire through the alleys. A door slammed somewhere, a dog barked, then silence returned. It wasn't a dead silence, not an oppressive one. Rather, one that left space. Space for what was, and for what was yet to come.

The moon shone faintly over the hills. It was tilted, like a crooked smile. Its light fell on the sea, and where the water moved, it glittered in a pattern that seemed almost human. Some would have said it was just wave reflection. Others would have sworn someone was standing there.

But no one went. People instinctively knew that they shouldn't touch certain things, because otherwise they would cease to live.

Inside the hall, where the dust filled the air, the old table still stood. And when the wind blew right, it sounded like someone was drumming on it. Very lightly. Three beats, pause, three beats. Like a heart remembering.

No one paid attention. No one had to. Kattegat continued to live, quietly, steadily.

And yet—there was something in the silence. A presence that needed no body. No spirit, no apparition, no miracle. Only a feeling.

That the one who had left was never really gone.

That silence doesn't erase anything — it preserves.

And that there are nights when even the darkness listens.

The wind retreated, as if it had said enough. Only the sea remained awake, that endless beast that never sleeps, never forgets, and yet never speaks. The air was heavy, tasting of iron, of salt, of things older than language.

At the edge of the forest, the trees whispered. Not a rustle of fear, more as if they were telling each other stories. About people who were coming, about fire, about blood. About Ivar. His deeds were long gone, but they had left scars—in the earth, in the wood, in the wind.

The grass on the hill slanted slightly, though no wind touched it. You could have sworn something was walking there. A movement too gentle for an animal, too fluid for chance. The shadows of the clouds passed over it like hands blessing.

The stars that appeared between the clouds glowed not cold, but warm. They looked like eyes that knew they were being seen. And below them lay Kattegat, small, breathless, but alive.

An old dog raised his head, looked out to sea, and barked once, for no reason. Then he lay down again, sighing as if he had been awake enough.

The water lapped gently against the jetty, steady, hypnotic. No storm was coming, no fog, no omens. Just this steady, weary flow, demanding nothing, giving nothing. And yet everything within it seemed to rest.

Somewhere in the forest, a branch cracked. A fox crept across the path, paused briefly, and looked toward the sea. It raised its snout, sniffed, and hesitated for a moment. Then it moved on, quietly, almost respectfully.

The night was no longer a space, but a body. It breathed. In every movement, in every sound, in every silence. And this breath was memory.

One might have thought the universe itself paused for a moment to listen. Not out of grief, but out of appreciation.

For even heaven knows when a storm has ended, not conquered but understood.

The fog began to form over the hills. Thin, transparent, friendly. It rolled slowly down, wrapping itself around the houses, the halls, the silent boats. Not a veil of death. A cloak.

The sea grew darker, heavier, like a gaze closing. But deep beneath the surface, something glowed. No light, no fire, just movement. Like the last remnant of a dream that never seems to end.

And when you lay awake that night, you thought you could hear the sea whispering. No words, just breath. But in that breath lay something you knew.

Something that remained.

In the morning, the world lay still. No fog, no storm, no shout. Only light, spreading over the sea like a hand saying: Enough is enough. The water was smooth, so smooth that even the sky hesitated to reflect itself in it. The wind had stopped, and the air was filled with that strange emptiness that only comes when something is truly over.

Kattegat slept. No fire burned, no blacksmith's hammer fell, no voice called. Only the seabirds, lazy and sated, circled the water, aimless, unhurried. On the beach lay traces of the night—driftwood, an old rowing bench, a broken jug half buried in the sand. The life that remained when humans finally stopped interfering.

The sun rose slowly, but without pride. No triumph, no new beginning. Only continuation. The warmth spread over the rooftops, over the grass, over the silent hill. Nothing moved there. No person, no animal. Only the hum of the earth.

If someone woke up in that hour, they heard nothing. No shouting, no song. Only this deep, full silence, which carried more weight than any voice. It was not empty, not dead. It was filled—with everything that was, and everything that was allowed to remain.

The sea continued to breathe. Slowly, surely, like a heart that had decided not to stop.

And somewhere inside, deep down, where the light no longer reaches, something rested. No body, no mind. Only movement. A trace of will that could not be extinguished. Not loud, not visible, but there.

The waves carried her, brought her to the shore, left her behind, and took her away again. Just as life treats everything it loves.

Ivar's name had long since turned to dust, to sound, to air. But his essence—that restless, unyielding something—was there. In the way children laughed, the way men drank, the way women remained silent. In the way Kattegat awoke in the morning and faded in the evening, always between calm and awakening, between wounds and pride.

And perhaps, just perhaps, that was the betrayal of silence: that it preserved everything one wanted to forget.

The sun was now high. The sea sparkled. The world lived on.

Without Ivar. With Ivar. As always.

And the silence – it remained.

A smile for Odin

I don't know how long the sea carried me. Time is a human flaw, and I was no longer one. There was no up, no down, only movement. At some point, the water stopped moving, and the light returned. Not bright, not holy—more like a hangover after a long night. I blinked. Before me stood a man, a beard that looked like he'd worn it three times before.

"So you made it," he said. His voice was deep, old, but not tired. I grinned. "It depends on what you mean by *done* understand." He nodded. "You're not alive. But you're not dead either. That's something."

He wore no helmet, no weapons, no golden shit. Just fur, leather, and one eye that pierced you like a nail. The other was empty, a hole that saw the world but said nothing. I knew immediately who he was. You can recognize guys like that at first glance.

"Odin," I said. "Ivar," he said.

We stood facing each other, two men without a place, without a people, without a future. I laughed. "I would have thought you were taller." He grinned back. "I would have thought you were more humble." "Then we were both wrong."

He sat down on a rock and lit something. No smoke, no fire, but the smell of burning things hung in the air. I sat down next to him. We both looked at the sea, which no longer existed, but behaved as if it still did.

"So," he said, "you've pretty much messed up the whole place." "I know," I said. "It was intentional." "I like that." "I know."

He laughed, and it sounded like thunder that had forgotten how to be angry. I laughed along. Two idiots who realized too late that they were alike.

"They tell stories about you," he said. "They tell lies." "Same." I nodded. "And about you?" "Even more lies."

We were silent for a while. Only light. Only breath. Then he said, "You don't believe in me, do you?" "I don't believe in anything that requires worship." "Good. Me neither anymore."

I grinned. "So you're unemployed too." He laughed again, deeper this time. "Maybe. But someone has to keep the laughter going." "Then you do it. I've laughed enough." "You're lying." "True."

He stood up, stepped closer, and looked at me. One eye was fire, the other emptiness. "You're the only one who's never needed me." "And you're the only one who understands me."

He nodded. No divine blessing, no thunder, no light. Just that brief, human nod. Then he placed his hand on my shoulder. "There aren't many who can make me laugh, Boneless." "I'm no joker either." "That's precisely why."

He took a few steps, turned around, and grinned. "You know what the best thing about eternity is?" "Tell me." "That at some point you won't give a shit about it."

I grinned back. "Then I've already arrived."

He laughed. Loudly. Freely. And somewhere between that laughter and the silence that followed, something inside me opened.

Not light. Not salvation. Just an honest, little smile.

For him. For me. For everything.

Odin sat back down and pulled two cups out of thin air. I swear he didn't have them before. He handed me one as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "Mead?" he asked. I sniffed it. It smelled of smoke, blood, snow. "Does it at least taste good?" "Depends on how honest you are." I grinned. "Then it'll be bitter."

We drank. It burned, but not unpleasantly. More like truth. That burning sensation that keeps you awake because otherwise you'd think too much. Odin drank deeply, wiped his mouth, and sighed. "You know," he said, "I eventually lost count of how many people believed in me." "I never started." "Maybe that was your trick." "Or your mistake."

He laughed, that short, staccato sound that carried more weight than thunder. "You were never a believer." "I was never stupid enough to trust someone who calls himself God." "Then you're smarter than most of my followers." "That wasn't difficult."

We were silent. The sea slowly retreated, as if it had heard enough. I looked into my cup. The drink was dark, almost black. No reflection, no light. Only depth. "So?" I asked. "What will you do now that no one believes in you anymore?" He looked at me, one eye still, the other bright. "I'm thinking." "About what?" "About men like you." "What's there to think about?" "Why I created you."

I laughed. "Maybe because you were bored." "Or because I wanted to know if anyone could do it better." "And?" "You did it worse. But more honestly."

He drank again, looked up at the sky, which wasn't a sky here. "I used to think faith was what made me strong. But it was fear. Fear of being forgotten. At least you're honest about your transience." "Transience is the only thing that lasts." "Well said. Did you learn that?" "While dying."

He nodded slowly, as if he understood. "I've been watching you, you know?" he said. "I know." "I liked that you never prayed." "I liked that you never helped." He grinned broadly. "Do you know why I didn't help?" "Because you couldn't." "Because you didn't want to."

We looked at each other. No hatred. No pride. Just this quiet recognition that both were right.

Odin leaned back. "I've seen many men who thought they were greater than death. You were the first to understand that size had nothing to do with it." "I only fought because lying down was uncomfortable." "And that made you immortal." "Then immortality is overrated." "Now you're talking like me."

I grinned. "That was never my goal." "I know. And that's exactly why you're here."

We drank again. No toast, no saying, no reason. Just drinking, because talking was harder when you did it dry.

"What will become of your world?" I asked. "It's slowly forgetting me. First the names, then the symbols. Soon all that will remain is the thought: that power costs something." "And what does it cost?" "Everything that makes you human." I nodded. "Then I was rich." "And broke at the same time." "Like you." He laughed, short, honest. "Like me."

We sat there, two worn-out myths, and watched the sea tell its own story.

"You know, Ivar," he said quietly, "I think the gods need you more than you need us." "Then that's your curse." "And your gift."

I emptied my cup and looked at him. "You're not as bad as they say." "Neither are you, as they think." We both grinned. Then he said, "Have another drink with me." "Why?" "Because no one else will anymore."

And I did it. Not for him. For myself.

For everything that made us equal.

We sat next to each other on this stone that wasn't a stone, in a world that wasn't a place, and continued drinking. Odin hadn't forgotten how to drink. Neither had I. It was like a reflex—the hand reaches out, the mouth takes, the thoughts stumble. After the third cup, you heard yourself talking less, and that was a good thing.

"War," he said at one point. "A beautiful word. So short, so clear. And everyone misunderstands it." "Wrong?" "Most people think war has to do with courage. But it's just fear that's gotten too loud." I nodded. "I always thought war was a test. Who stays standing, who falls first." "So? What have you learned?" "That staying standing and falling are the same thing, if you do it long enough."

He laughed, short and deep. "You talk like someone who's been right too often." "I talk like someone who's seen too much." "That's worse."

We drank again. The sound was the only thing that moved.

"Do you know why you fight wars?" he asked. "Because you gods need them." "No," he said. "Because otherwise you'd get bored. You want meaning. And meaning stinks when it stands still." "Then you built us well." "I only started you. You did the rest yourselves."

I grinned. "And how did things go in love?" He snorted. "Worse. Love is like war, only with worse weapons." "And more lies." "Exactly."

I took a sip and lowered the cup. "I've never understood why love has to hurt." "Because otherwise it wouldn't be love." "Only people who've never truly loved say that." "Then I'm innocent." "Me too."

We both stared into nothingness. No sky, no ground. Just space so silent you could hear your own thoughts, boredom.

"You had women, right?" he asked. "A few." "And?" "Everyone wanted the warrior, no one wanted the man." "Classic." "And you?" "I had one who was smarter than me."

"What happened?" "I was stupid enough to notice."

I laughed. "Then at least there were two of us." "Three," he said. "Life is part of it."

We continued drinking. It wasn't drunkenness, it wasn't celebration. Just what remains when two old wolves forget how to howl.

"You know, Ivar," he said after a while, "you were never cruel. Just honest in a world that considers that cruel." "And you were never wise. Just old enough to be called that." He grinned. "Finally, someone who understands me." "Finally, someone who doesn't listen anymore."

We were silent. The world around us grew darker, but not threateningly. Rather, weary. Like a fire slowly turning to embers.

"And now?" I asked. "What happens to us?" "Nothing," he said. "That's the beauty of it." "So no reincarnation, no honor, no Valhalla?" "Only if you need it." "I don't need it." "Me neither."

I leaned back, looking into the gray light that was everywhere. "Then only this remains." "What?" "The talking. The drinking. The laughing." "And that's enough." "Yes," I said. "That's enough."

Odin stood up and stretched. "You're the first person I feel comfortable with." "That's sad." "No. That's honest."

He offered me his hand. I took it. No divine fire, no glow. Just skin, warm, rough, real.

And in that moment, for a moment, I was sure: Even the gods drink only to endure the silence.

We sat down again, the light had changed. No day, no night, something in between, where everything seems equally important and equally unimportant. Odin played with the cup in his hand, turning it slowly, as if searching for answers. I knew he wouldn't find any. I knew that feeling.

"Tell me," he said, "what do you think all that was for?" I grinned. "Life?" "The whole thing. War, pain, glory, love. The dirt. The blood. The death." I looked at

him, took a sip. "Maybe nothing at all." "That doesn't sound very comforting." "It's not meant to be."

He nodded. "I've always watched you humans, how you fight, love, lose, and get back up again. I thought there was something behind it. A structure, a meaning, an idea." "Well," I said. "Maybe that was your mistake. Too much thinking, too little living." "And what was yours?" "I've lived too much to be able to think anymore."

He laughed, but quietly, as if afraid of disturbing the silence. "And what is freedom, Ivar? You always talked about being free, from everything, even from the gods." "Freedom?" I spat into the dust, which wasn't there here. "Freedom is when you know no one is coming to save you—and you keep going anyway." "That's hard." "That's real."

He nodded again, slowly, heavily. "Perhaps I was never free. I was always bound. To the world, to beliefs, to expectations. Perhaps this is the curse of the gods: that we are needed, even when no one wants us anymore." "Then you're worse off than we are." "Yes," he said. "I envy you. You may die."

I grinned wearily. "And you can be forgotten. In the end, it all comes down to the same thing."

We sat there, each in his own silence. I saw his hands. They were shaking slightly. "You're old," I said.

"It always was me. I am time, Ivar." "And what are you without it?" He remained silent. That was answer enough.

I looked at the sea, which wasn't one, and thought aloud: "I always believed I had to leave something behind. A name, a sign, something that would last. But in the end..." "...all that remains is what you were," he said. "Exactly. No throne, no glory. Just the movement. The defiance. The laughter in pain." "That's more than most people manage."

I looked at him. "And what remains of you, Odin?" "A few stories. A few runes. Perhaps a curse." "And you?" "I'll stay as long as someone is still laughing, even though they shouldn't."

He grinned, that crooked, old grin you can only wear when you know everything important is long gone. "Then you'll live forever, Boneless." "I don't need eternity. It's enough that it bothers you."

He laughed loudly, that thunderous, unholy laugh. And for a moment there was something like peace.

Not the divine, not the holy. The honest one.

Two men who had stopped believing — and finally began to understand.

The light softened. It crept across the ground, across the stones, above us. No sunset, no sunrise, only this eternal in-between, so honest because it promises nothing. Odin had placed his cup on the ground. It was empty, but he left it there, as if afraid to fill it. I did the same. Two empty cups between two men who knew nothing more had to come.

"You know," said Odin, "I thought the end would be louder." I grinned. "It never is. Only the beginning screams." He nodded slowly. "And if no one's listening?" "Then at least it was real."

He looked toward the horizon, where nothingness began. "Maybe all of this was a test." "For whom?" "For me. For you. For everything." "Then you've messed up." "All of us."

He laughed, that tired, warm laugh. "I like you, Ivar." "I like myself too." "That explains a lot." "And solves nothing."

He stood up, stretched, and looked into the light, which wasn't brightening, but rather deepening. "I think that's it for us." "And what happens now?" "Nothing, I hope." "Then we're agreed."

He turned to me. No longer a God. Just an old man with eyes that had seen too much. "Perhaps that's true grace," he said. "To no longer be needed." I looked at him, understanding him in a way no prayer ever could. "Perhaps."

He stepped closer, offering me his hand. No ritual, no vow. Just a gesture. I took it. It was firm, warm, real. "Take care of yourself, Boneless One." "I'm already dead, Odin." "That's precisely why."

He grinned. Then he left. No light, no smoke, no divine farewell. He simply walked, step by step, until the gray swallowed him. No clap of thunder, no sign. Only silence.

I stayed seated. Slowly, I pulled the cup back toward me and looked into it. Nothing. No drops, no reflection, just depth.

I thought: *Maybe that's all that remains.*

No heaven, no Valhalla, no glory. Only that moment when you stop asking and finally just are there.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I thought of nothing. Not of blood, not of pain, not of war. Only of laughter. Mine, his, the world's.

And somewhere in between was peace. Not a great, not a holy peace, just that small, honest peace that comes when everything is over.

I raised the cup again, empty as I was, and whispered, "Cheers, old man."

Then I drank the nothing.

It tasted of peace.

The light faded slowly. No darkness, no day. Only that thin gray that remains when both have seen enough of each other. I sat there, my hands empty, my gaze somewhere between memory and indifference. The stone beneath me was cold, but honest. I liked that. Honesty is rare, even after death.

Odin was gone. No sound, no trace. Only the wind, acting as if he'd always been there. I heard him whisper, but not in words. More like a breath checking the world one last time before he leaves.

I looked out into the nothingness, which moved as if it had a purpose. No stars, no sky. Just movement. And then I understood something I had never understood in my lifetime: Peace is not the end of war. Peace is when you stop hoping someone will win.

I lay back. The ground welcomed me, soft as an old blanket. No weight, no pain. I closed my eyes. There was no sleep, no dreams. Only that slow fading that feels like finally fitting into yourself.

The laughter was still there. Not loud, not close. Just somewhere back, deep in the distance. Odin's laughter. Mine. Perhaps the world's too. It rolled quietly through the void, lost itself, came back, thinner, warmer. I grinned. It was nice to end with a smile.

The light flickered once more. No flash, no sign, just this final gasp of the world smiling at itself. I couldn't see it clearly anymore. I didn't need to.

The air grew still. The wind stopped playing. The sea, which wasn't a sea, retreated. Nothing remained that could be named. Only a feeling—the gentle aftershock of a life that had finally stopped resisting.

I thought: *Maybe that was it. And that's a good thing.*

Then there was nothing. No sound, no breath, no thought. Only silence.

But it wasn't an empty silence. It was warm. And she smiled back.

Morning came silently. No rooster, no call, no awakening. Only the slow opening of the world. A light that no longer wanted to know who it belonged to. It settled over water, over stones, over what was once blood, over everything that had forgotten its purpose.

The sea moved sluggishly, indifferently, like a satiated animal. It had taken what it was entitled to, and it wanted no more. The waves came and went, without pressure, without purpose. A regularity that signified peace.

The air was clear. No smoke, no fire. Just the smell of salt and age. And in that smell lay a residue. No ghost, no echo, just this small trace of something that was once human.

A bird perched on an old post, looked out, and flapped its wings once, as if testing whether the world was still holding up. It was. Then it flew away. No sign, no meaning. Just flight.

The wind moved through the grass, groping its way forward, sweeping over the earth that had taken everything and retained nothing. No grave, no stone, no name. Only silence. But the silence was alive. It sounded like breathing, only without a body.

And somewhere in the north, far beyond sight, thunder rolled. Not anger, not a storm. Just a memory, heard once more before it was gone for good.

The light grew brighter. It fell on the sea, refracted, slid over the waves, until there was nothing left but shadow. Everything was the same. Water, air, time.

The world had learned to live without noise. Without a king. Without God. Without questions.

And yet—whoever stood completely still during that hour could feel it. A trembling in the air, barely noticeable. Like a smile.

A smile for the one who refused to die standing. For the one who made the gods laugh. For the one who betrayed the silence—and thereby made it real.

Then everything was quiet again.

And the world continued to breathe. Slowly. Patiently. As always.

The bone that broke

Kattegat smelled of work again. Of smoke, of sweat, of life that carries on because it has no other choice. New men, new rules, the same old faces, just with different names. They called themselves kings, jarls, traders, seers—all the same old game. Everyone wanted power, no one understood it.

The halls were newly built, larger, smoother, emptier. The runes on the walls told stories written with clean hands—without dirt, without blood, without truth. It was history for those who hadn't been there.

An old man stood before it and read aloud. His voice trembled slightly, not from reverence, but from weariness. "Here rested Ivar Ragnarsson, the Boneless, son of Ragnar, conqueror of cities, breaker of nations." Then he paused. "Hero of ancient times." The crowd nodded, obediently, silently. No one objected.

But among them stood a boy, barefoot, thin, with the same bright eyes that time could never fully erase. He listened, looked at the runes, at the bare wood, and whispered: "Liar."

Nobody heard him.

He spat on the ground, turned around, and left. The old man continued talking, words like dust, light but everywhere. "He fought to his last breath. He died with honor. Odin took him to himself."

The boy walked through the streets. He knew no heroes. Only hunger, noise, and the roar of hammers from the forge. There was no Odin, no thunder, no halls for the dead. Only the stench of life, raw and untransfigured.

He passed a wall where an old piece of metal hung. Rusty, bent, useless. Someone had forgotten it. He stopped and touched it with his fingers. It was cold, but somehow familiar.

A man walked by and looked at him. "It's old. From the Boneless, they say." The boy looked at him. "And what did it achieve?" The man shrugged. "Nothing. Like everything." "Then at least it was real."

The man grinned crookedly, not understanding, and moved on. The boy stood there for a moment, then took the piece of metal from the wall and put it in his pocket. No theft. Just a memory that wanted to breathe again.

Smoke hung over the rooftops. There was screaming in the alleys. And somewhere, someone hammered a nail, hard, rhythmic, steady. The sound reverberated through the streets like a heartbeat, the echo of something no one recognized anymore, but everyone felt.

The legends grew older, smoother, more comfortable. But beneath the surface—beneath the wood, dust, and names—something glowed that couldn't be buried.

Something that remembered what a bone feels like just before it breaks.

The boy's name was Harek, but no one called him that. In Kattegat, children who asked too many questions were called "troublemakers." He had the kind of look that frightened old men and made priests nervous. Not because he was loud—but because he remained silent when everyone else was talking.

He worked in the smithy, hammering nails like his father did, like his father had done. The same movements, the same sounds. Everything repeated itself, until it no longer made a difference whether one lived or merely watched. But something was growing inside Harek. Not anger, not a dream—something harder, wordless.

At midday, he sometimes came to the great hall. There hung the runes, shining, smooth, made of clean wood. Strangers came, looked at them, and bowed, as if words could hold greatness. Harek stood beside them, sweating, covered in soot, his hands black. And he thought: *You don't know anything.*

He read the lines that spoke of Ivar—of the boneless one, the hero, the chosen one of the gods. Everything resonated with heroism, honor, and victory. Not a word about dirt, blood, pain, or fear. Not a word about anger. Not a word about humanity.

He felt anger. That quiet, honest anger, the kind you don't shout, but breathe. The kind that stays when everything else goes quiet.

Once, the old man who read the runes came to him. He looked at Harek and smiled patronizingly. "Are you interested in history, boy?" Harek nodded. "In truth." The old man laughed. "Same." "No," said Harek. "One can be written. The other, not."

The old man frowned. "You're cheeky." "I'm awake."

He got a slap. Not a big one, not a painful one. One of those casual, empty slaps meant only to demonstrate power. Harek grinned. "It doesn't hurt." "Then it wasn't enough." "Yes, it was," he said. "I understand who you are."

The old man left. Harek stayed. He stood there, looking at the runes, and something inside him tensed. "You've softened him," he murmured. "You've written him off."

That evening, he returned to the forge. The sky burned red, the sea lay still. He took a hammer, placed the piece of metal on the anvil—the old, rusty one he'd found—and struck it. Not to shape it, but to hear what it would say next.

After the third beat, it sounded: dull, deep, alive.

He paused. There was no echo, but the sound remained within him. He felt it in his bones, in his chest. "So it is," he whispered.

He continued to hit, steady, hard. Each blow sounded like a memory refusing to die quietly.

At some point, another blacksmith came by and looked at him. "What are you doing?" "I'm waking something up." "What?" "Something they wanted to forget."

The man shook his head and moved on. Harek stayed. He beat until darkness fell. And when he stopped, the air smelled of metal and the past.

The moon hung above him. Cold, still, curious.

And Harek thought: *Maybe this is the bone that breaks again.*

Not out of weakness. Out of truth.

Harek went out at night, when Kattegat was asleep. No light, no sound, only the wind blowing over the wood heavy with stories. The city was different at

night. More honest. No prayers, no heroic songs, only the shadows moving like memories that hadn't yet found a place.

He walked up the old path to the hill that no one visited anymore. Once, they said, the gods were worshipped here. Now it was just a patch of earth where grass grew and silence lay. But he felt something. Something beneath his skin. Something breathing.

He knelt down and placed his hand on the ground. Cold. Damp. But there was a pulse. Not a heartbeat, not really—more like an echo, deep and quiet. "You're still here," he whispered.

He didn't know why he said that. Maybe he was talking to himself. Maybe to the earth. Maybe to something that no longer existed, but still responded.

A gust of wind came, swirling around him, like a hand checking whether someone was serious. Harek remained calm. "I want to know what it was like," he said. "Not how they tell it."

The wind died down. The night was silent. And precisely in that silence was an answer. No words, no sign. Only the feeling that somewhere deep down, something had twitched briefly—like a muscle remembering what it was once for.

He began to dig. Not with tools, just with his hands. Dirt under his fingernails, cold in his skin. He didn't know what he was looking for. Only that he couldn't stop.

After a while, he came across wood. Rotten, damp, old. He kept scratching until he felt an edge. Then he pulled. The piece broke off, lightly, like paper. But it smelled. Not of death—of time.

Something lay beneath it. A bone. Thin, smooth, clean. Too clean to be real, too old to seem fake. He took it in his hand. "Is that you?" he whispered.

No echo. No sign. Only silence. But this silence was different. Dense. Alert. He held up the bone, and for a moment he thought the moonlight was brightening.

Harek grinned. "I found you."

He wrapped the bone in a piece of cloth he tore from his belt and tucked it under his jacket. Then he stood up and looked down at the sea. It lay still, almost friendly.

"They say you were cruel," he murmured. "But maybe you were just being honest."

He walked back, slowly, step by step, through the barely moving grass. And somewhere behind him, deep in the ground, something vibrated. Not loud, not threatening. Just like a breath.

The men were asleep in the smithy. Harek placed the bone on the table, looked at it as if he needed to check whether it was genuine. Then he placed his hand on it.

The bone was warm.

He smiled.

Not like a child who has discovered something. Like someone who has finally understood something.

Harek woke up early, before the sun rose over the hill. The forge smelled of iron and cold. The bone lay there, on the table where he had left it. The light fell on it, making it bright, almost alive. He looked at it, and for the first time, he felt as if something was looking at him. No ghost, no magic, nothing supernatural. Just presence. Like a gaze without eyes.

He placed his hand on it. Warm. Still. He pulled it back, waited, put it down again. The same thing. "You're breathing," he whispered. "Damn it, you're breathing."

Outside, life went on. Hammers, voices, horses, the usual noise that makes people believe they're in control. But inside Harek, everything tensed up. He no longer heard the sounds of the city, only this faint throbbing beneath his skin that didn't belong to him. Not a heartbeat, not exactly. More like a memory trying to live.

He grabbed the bone, held it in his fist, tight until it hurt. Images came. No clear ones, no stories, just splinters. Blood. Cold. Laughter. Metal. And that sound—the cracking of something that won't break.

He gasped. The bone fell from his hand, rolling across the table. "Shit," he gasped. "What are you?"

He waited, but nothing happened. Only silence. The kind of silence you don't hear, but feel – like pressure in your skull, like a breath that won't go away.

Harek sat down, staring at the thing, which now lay there harmlessly again. Just a bone. But he knew that wasn't true. He reached for it again, cautiously, as if he were handling an animal. "If you want to talk," he whispered, "then do it now."

Nothing. Just his own breath.

Then, quietly, almost imperceptibly, it came back. Not a word, not a sentence. Just a thought that wasn't his:
Stand up.

He flinched and looked around. No one. Only shadows.

Stand up.

He stood up. Automatically. Without knowing why.

You are lying.

He didn't know what to say. He wasn't crazy. Not yet. But there was something there. Not a ghost, not a demon. Something ancient. A truth that was finding its way.

He went to the door and stepped out into the alley. The wind was cold, biting, but he felt clearer than usual. Every smell, every sound was sharper. As if someone had peeled off a second skin, and now he felt the world as it really was.

He went to the place where the runes stood. The same smooth, lifeless symbols. People stood before them, listening, nodding, believing.

Harek stopped and looked at them. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out the bone, and held it up. "You want the truth?" he shouted. No one answered. A few turned around and looked at him, irritated.

"Then stop burying them."

An old man stepped forward, the same voice that used to read the heroic tales. "What's this, boy?" "This," said Harek, "was one of those you softened up."

The crowd murmured. Someone laughed. Someone spat.

"Put that away," said the old man. "It's blasphemy." "No," said Harek calmly. "It's memory."

He looked at the crowd, at their faces, empty, tired, afraid. "He wasn't one of your heroes," he said. "He was real. And that's more than you can say."

Then he left. No commotion, no scream, no wonder. Just footsteps in the dust.

The bone throbbed in his hand. Warm. Calm. Alive.

And deep within him, where fear once was, something new grew. Not anger. Not faith. Only will.

The kind of will that makes even gods uneasy.

Since that day, Kattegat talked about the blacksmith's boy. Not loudly, but enough to make it stick everywhere. Some called him crazy, others cheeky, some simply dangerous. And the old folks said he had "something in his eyes." That something you see in people who can no longer obey, even if they want to.

Harek continued to work. By day, he struck metal, at night, he went to the hill. Always with the bone in his pocket. He didn't talk much anymore. But when someone looked at him, he looked back, and that was enough. People hated that look—because he had no fear.

Sometimes the wind came from the sea. Then he heard it again. That quiet pounding, like a second heartbeat. And each time he felt it, he struck the iron harder. Not out of anger. Out of clarity. As if he needed to remind the world that it's not made up of stories, but of blows.

One evening, the old man who had slapped him returned. He stood in the smithy, watching Harek work. "You should have become a soldier," he said. "For whom?" "For Kattegat." "Better dead then."

The old man frowned. "You talk like someone who doesn't believe in anything." "I've learned what faith can do."

"And what does unbelief do?" Harek looked at him. "It sets you free."

The old man was silent. For the first time, he didn't know what to say.

The days passed. The boy grew, but not in the direction anyone expected. His muscles grew harder, his gaze calmer, his tongue sharper. He had no friends, no family anymore. Only the bone. And sometimes he talked to him, quietly, in the dark, as if it were normal.

"They forgot you," he said. "But I didn't."

He didn't know if anyone answered. But he didn't feel alone. And that was enough.

One night, when the sky was heavy and the sea smelled as if it were about to rise, he went back to the hill. The wind was strong, the ground wet. He stood there, holding the bone in his hand, and called into the darkness:

"If you have anything else to say, say it now!"

The wind was silent at first. Then it returned, harder, circling. The grasses flattened. Harek stood still, the thing in his hand, his gaze upward. No voice, no light. Only this pressure that almost brought him to his knees. And in the midst of it all, a thought, clear, direct, unmistakable:

Retell it.

Harek nodded. He knew what was meant.

The next day he returned to the hall. The same people, the same runes, the same lies. He went to the front of the crowd and placed the bone on the stone floor. "You call him hero," he said. "I call him human."

A murmur went through the rows. "Blasphemy!" one shouted. "Shut up!" another.

Harek grinned. "You call it blasphemy when someone tells the truth. I call it remembering."

He stepped back, picked up the bone again, and left. No commotion, no blood, no fight. Just a glance over his shoulder, so silent it was louder than any words.

And from that day on, no one spoke aloud about him anymore. But everyone saw him as he walked through the streets. Some spat. Some bowed unconsciously.

That's how it always begins. First mockery. Then fear. Then faith.

And Harek? He remained calm. He knew what was coming. Because even if you bury the legend, the bone will break again.

And this time on purpose.

At first, no one listened to him. He just stood there, in the corner of the tavern, while men drank, laughed, and boasted. The same old stories played as always—filtered through pride, honed by truth, smoothed by fear. And Harek stood there, the bone in his pocket, and listened until he felt sick.

Then he spoke. Not loudly, not like a preacher. Just quietly. "You talk about heroes who never froze," he said. "Of warriors who never cried. Of gods who never lied. All crap."

Heads turned. One laughed. "What do you know, boy?" "More than you," said Harek.

"Oh, really?" "I know that the Boneless One didn't fight for honor. Not for glory. Not for Odin. He fought because living hurts. Because lying down was worse than dying."

The men stared at him. One snorted, one grinned. "You talk like you were there." "Maybe I was."

Laughter. Loud, rude, drunken. But it didn't completely die down. It lingered, somewhere between disbelief and doubt.

The next evening, he stood there again. This time, more people were listening. "You think strength means not being afraid," he said. "But strength is when you feel it anyway—and keep going."

An old fisherman nodded. Only briefly. Barely visible. That was enough.

The days passed. The tavern filled up. Not because they believed him, but because they wanted to know what someone without a name could dare to say. And Harek spoke. Not with pathos, not with preachiness. Just with that quiet, dirty honesty that carried more truth than all the runes combined.

He didn't tell tales. He told tales of blood. Dirt. Rage. He spoke of Ivar, not as a king, but as a man who never stopped fighting against himself. About laughing in pain. About the burning that never gives rest.

And the more he spoke, the quieter the tavern became.

Once, the old man who was reading the heroic tales came in. He stood at the door and listened. When Harek finished, he simply said, "You insult history." "No," said Harek. "I'll free it."

The old man wanted to answer, but didn't. He left. And no one stopped him.

In the days that followed, whispers began to spread. Not loudly, but often. "The boy with the bone tells a different story," they said. "He doesn't talk about fame." "He talks about pain." "He talks like it's real."

And at some point, as another winter arrived, Harek stood on the hill again. The wind was cold, the sky was low. He held the bone up, the light falling on it.

"They're listening," he said quietly. "Finally."

He felt it vibrate in his hand. No miracle, no sign. Just life.

Maybe that was the point. Truth needs no miracles. Only courage.

And sometimes — a boy with an old bone.

Winter came with a heavy breath. Snow settled over Kattegat like a blanket that sought to conceal more than protect. The boats lay still, the sea silent. Small fires burned in the houses, just enough to make one feel alive.

And on one of those nights, as the wind blew through the alleys and the ice crunched on the roofs, men and women sat together in the tavern. They talked, as always. About trade, about fish, about hunger. And then one of them began: "Did you hear what the boy said?"

It wasn't a loud question. More a cautious probing, as if afraid that even speaking might change something. Another nodded. "About the Boneless?" "Yes." "I heard. Sounds... different." "More honest."

A third, old and tired, looked into his cup. "Maybe he was never the hero we needed. Maybe he was just the one we deserved." No one laughed.

Outside, snow fell. Quietly, steadily. As if it wanted to cover the world that had said too much. But the words remained. They clung to the walls, to hearts, to the air.

The next day, a child stood in front of the Rune Hall. He looked at the engraved symbols and asked his mother, "Why don't they write that he suffered?" His mother had no answer.

That evening, a fisherman, drunk and honest, told a story about the boy in the smithy. "He talks as if the bone itself were talking," he said. And someone replied, "Maybe he is."

That's how it began. No revolution, no outcry. Just stories that changed. First in the taverns, then in the markets, then in the songs. Slowly, inconspicuously, like a wind changing direction without anyone noticing.

The story of Ivar began again. But this time, it was different. No golden hero, no chosen one of the gods.

A man. A body that broke and yet carried on. A will that laughed even though it bled. A truth that could no longer be sung away.

And somewhere, deep beneath the hill, beneath earth, ice, and memory, the bone rested silently. It had finally grown cold. But its echo remained warm.

Harek moved on. He spoke less, worked more. The forge sounded like a heartbeat every day. Steady. Hard. Alive.

One evening, when the fire was almost out, he placed the bone back on the table. He looked at it. "I think you can sleep now," he said quietly. He waited. No answer. Only peace.

Then he placed him in the fire. The flame flickered, grew brighter, and consumed him slowly, calmly, without a sound. And Harek smiled. No triumph, no loss. Only fulfillment.

The bone broke. And finally there was peace.

Outside, the wind shifted. Above the sea, a raven circled. Not searching. Just flying.

I was never holy

The years had passed over Harek as they had over everything else. Quietly, patiently, without haste, but thoroughly. His hands were covered with scars, his back bent, his shoulders heavy from hammering and silence. The forge still stood, diminished, like everything that is old. The fire burned weakly but steadily. Sometimes he thought it breathed the same breath as he did.

He didn't talk much anymore. People called him "the blacksmith from the old hill." Some said he was wise. Others said he was crazy. But most left him alone, and that was enough for him.

Tools hung on the walls, blunt but faithful. Iron that had heard more than it had spoken. In a corner lay a piece of metal he had never finished forging. He no longer knew what it would become. Perhaps he never knew.

Sometimes young men came, curious, awed, foolish with youth. "Tell us about the past," they begged. "About the times of heroes." Harek looked at them for a long time, until they grew restless. "Heroes?" he finally said. "They only exist in stories. And stories lie because they have to."

They laughed uncertainly and left again. Only one stayed longer one day. A thin boy with the same bright eyes Harek had once seen in the mirror. "And you?" the boy asked. "Were you one?" Harek grinned. "Me? I was never holy."

He turned around and placed a piece of iron on the fire. It hissed, as if it wanted to object. "I've made mistakes," he said. "I've loved when it was stupid, kept silent when it hurt, and struck when I should have spoken." "And do you regret it?" "No," he said. "I only regret that I sometimes tried to be different."

The boy nodded, not understanding, but sensing something. That raw, honest trembling between guilt and pride that you don't find in books.

"They say you knew the Boneless," he whispered. Harek laughed. A dry sound, half cough, half truth. "I never knew him. But I understood him." "And what was he?" "A mirror," said Harek. "For everything we don't want to be—and yet are."

He placed the iron back on the anvil and raised the hammer. The blow echoed deeply, like a memory that had to pass through the room one more time before it disappeared.

"They say you changed his story." "No," Harek said calmly. "I just straightened it out."

The boy nodded and stepped back. "And now?" "Now I wait," said Harek. "For what?" "For peace."

He raised the hammer again and struck. Sparks flew, warm, bright, and fleeting. One of them struck his hand, burning briefly. He didn't flinch.

The fire sizzled. Outside, rain fell.

And Harek thought: *Maybe that was all there was to it—no victory, no glory, just the knowledge that you were real, even if no one wanted you to be.*

He smiled. Not proudly. Not bitterly. Just honestly.

Harek sat outside, in front of the smithy. The sky was gray, the sea calm, so calm it almost made him angry. Peace had never made him feel comfortable. It was the kind of silence that comes when no one has the courage to be loud anymore.

He saw the children down on the path. They were playing war. One shouted, "I am Ivar! I am the Boneless!" and hurled a stick like an axe. The others laughed, screamed, fell over, playing death, playing glory.

Harek watched them for a long time without smiling. Then he stood up and walked slowly down the slope. The children only noticed him when his shadow fell on them.

"You know his name," he said. "But do you know his scars?"

They looked at him, bewildered, uncertain. "He was a warrior!" one exclaimed. "A hero!" "No," said Harek. "He was a man who couldn't walk, yet he kept going."

The children were silent. One grinned crookedly. "That's almost the same thing." Harek shook his head. "No. One is courage. The other is truth."

They didn't understand. Of course not. They were too young. And yet something stuck, like a splinter. He saw it in their faces, that small, uncomfortable twitch when someone realizes for the first time that stories are lies.

Later, after they had run away, Harek lingered. He looked at the ground, at the snow turning into small gray patches. Then he felt it again—that bitter, beautiful feeling when you see that the truth has disguised itself again.

Throughout the city, they retold his words. First in whispers, then aloud. "He was a man who couldn't walk, yet he kept going." They put it into songs, into poems, into sayings on the walls. And eventually, they said again: "He was a hero."

Harek heard this and laughed. That rough, old laugh that was more smoke than sound.

He went to the tavern in the evening, sat in the corner, drank beer that was too thin, and listened to them singing. The same notes, the same words, only this time with his line in it.

A man came to him, drunk, with red eyes and a good heart. "They're singing your truth, old blacksmith." "No," said Harek. "They're singing theirs again." "But they remember." "They always do. Wrong, but with feeling."

The man laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "Perhaps that's enough." "Perhaps," said Harek, "but not for me."

He finished his drink, put down the cup, and stood up. Outside, the sky was open, no stars, only wind.

He thought of Ivar, of the bone, of the nights on the hill. How truth had screamed then, raw, unpolished, real. Now it sang again. Beautiful, but a lie.

He stopped and listened briefly. Then he murmured: "Always the same. The world can only love the truth if it first pulls its teeth."

He spat into the snow and grinned. "I was never holy. I preferred to bite them."

Then he went back to the smithy. The wind followed him, silent and respectful, like one who knows that honesty needs no prayer.

Winter was over. It stayed. Cold, dull, quiet. Harek no longer counted the days. The forge was his breath, the fire his heart. Both flickered less frequently, but never completely extinguished. That was the way with everything that was real—it burned more slowly, but longer.

He woke up, fell asleep again, sometimes with his mouth open, sometimes with his eyes open. The nights were filled with voices that could no longer find words. No gods, no dreams, only memories that refused to be silent.

One morning, the boy returned. The same one who had once asked him if he'd been a hero. Only older now, with his own wrinkles, with that expression on his face that life eventually gives everyone. "You still work?" he asked. "I'm still breathing," Harek said.

The boy looked at the fire. It was small, but clear. "They're talking about you in town. Saying you were the last one to know the truth." Harek grinned. "Then it's my fault they're lying again." "Why do you say that?" "Because truth always becomes a tool. Some hit with it, others adorn themselves with it. But in the end, it's still a hammer."

He looked at the boy for a long time. "And you? Do you still believe in heroes?" The boy hesitated. "I believe in people who try." Harek nodded. "That's enough."

He slowly stood up, walked to the fire, picked up the tongs, and twisted a piece of metal. The glow was reflected in his small, but alert eyes. "I've been hammering all my life," he said. "On iron, on words, on lies. And do you know what I've learned?" "What?" "That everything eventually softens. Even steel. Even pride."

The boy said nothing. He just watched as the old man slowly dipped the iron into the water. The hissing sound was loud in the silence. An honest sound.

"I'm not afraid of dying," said Harek. "I'm afraid that no one will laugh when I do." "Why?" "Because laughter is the last resort when you've lost everything else."

He sat back down and reached for his mug. No more beer, just water. "I've seen many men die," he said. "Most of them wanted to say something. I don't want to say anything more. I just want the fire to burn until no one freezes anymore."

The boy nodded. "Will you still be here tomorrow?" Harek grinned. "If not, then I'll be somewhere where I can finally shut up."

They were silent. Outside, snow fell. The fire crackled. A spark flew and landed on Harek's hand. He didn't flinch.

"You should tend the fire when I'm gone," Harek said quietly. "Me?" "You have the eyes for it."

The boy wanted to answer, but the old man just raised his hand. "No big words. That's what always gets us down."

Then he laughed. Not a long, loud laugh. Just that honest, tired laugh you only get when you've finally made peace with yourself.

"I was never holy," he said. "I was just awake."

And in that sentence lay everything—remorse, defiance, pride, life. More truth than Kattegat could ever have carved into runes.

That night, Kattegat was quieter than usual. No wind, no shouting, no barking. Only the steady crackling of wood. The fire in the forge burned dimly, but it burned. Like an old dog too tired to howl anymore.

Harek sat on his chair, his face half-covered by light, half-covered by shadow. His hands rested on his knees, calm, heavy, but no longer hard. He breathed slowly, evenly. The air smelled of metal, of ash, of the past.

He knew it was time. No pain, no trembling, no fear. Just this feeling that his body doesn't want to go on, but his mind is too polite to go first.

He looked at the fire. It flickered briefly, as if it knew he was looking. "You're the last one," he murmured. "Don't be fooling around while I'm gone."

A spark jumped in response. Harek grinned. "Good."

He thought of Ivar. Not the bone, not the legend. The man. The defiance. The laughter that hadn't disappeared even in death. "You were worse than me," he said quietly. "But you were right."

He looked at his hands. So much blood, so many years, so many blows. And yet – they looked peaceful. As if they had finally understood that they no longer had anything to prove.

He reached for the hammer, his old, trusty tool. The handle was smooth with life. He held it for a moment, then carefully placed it on the ground, as if putting an animal to sleep.

The fire crackled, flickering brighter, as if it were bidding him farewell. He felt the warmth on his face, heard his own breathing, shallow but calm.

Snow was falling outside. He thought: *This is what silence sounds like when it is honest.*

One last breath. No struggle, no words, no prayers. Just this feeling that everything is now where it belongs.

The fire moved. Slowly, in waves. Shadows danced on the wall, like memories that wouldn't go away. He saw them—Ivar, the sea, the children with the sticks, the boy with the bright eyes. All silent. All there.

"Nice," he murmured.

Then he let go. Not like someone who falls. Like someone who has finally carried enough.

The fire flickered brightly once more, then became calmer, more even. As if it had understood.

When the boy arrived the next morning, the forge was quiet. Harek sat there, his eyes closed, a slight grin on his lips. The fire was still burning. Warm. Gently.

He said nothing. He didn't have to. He just added wood, slowly, carefully.

And as the flame rose again, he whispered, "I was never holy."

Then he went out into the morning.

The light fell on the snow. And the fire continued to breathe.

The boy stayed in the smithy all day. He didn't speak, he didn't cry. He did what you do when you can't find the words: He worked.

He stoked the fire, added wood, and struck iron, not because he wanted to create anything, but so that the noise would not stop. So that the world would know that someone was still breathing here.

Outside, people passed by, curious, whispering. "He's dead," they said. "The old man?" "Yes. In his smithy." "As is only right."

Then they left again. No one stayed long. No one had time for silence.

Only the boy remained. He continued beating until evening came. The light slanted through the open door, cutting the dust and smoke into golden stripes. He looked up into the glow and thought that everything could be so simple if one stopped taking oneself seriously.

He made the fire smaller, as Harek did, not out of fear, but out of respect. The flames hissed, softly, gratefully. Then he sat down on the same chair where the old man had sat yesterday. He placed his hands on his knees, feeling the warmth in the wood, as if it had been waiting.

The hammer lay in the corner. He reached for it, held it tight, and felt the weight, both familiar and unfamiliar. "All right," he said. "It's my turn."

It was getting dark outside. He remained seated, the fire before him, the embers alive, calm, honest. No runes, no songs, no heroes. Only warmth. Only work. Only life.

Later, in the city, people would say that the boy never let the fire go out. That it burned on year after year, through winter, through hunger, through time. And that those who passed by sometimes thought they heard a voice—rough, dry, real—whispering:

"I was never holy."

And perhaps, on some evenings, when the fire began to flicker and the wind blew across Kattegat, somewhere an old god who had learned to listen smiled.

The fire continued to breathe. Slowly. Patiently. Like everything that truly endures.

The days that followed were quiet. No one spoke aloud about the old man. No song, no grave, no runes. Only smoke rising from the forge as if nothing had ever happened. But everyone who passed by felt it. Something was different. Not in the sky, not in the alleys—in the tone of the air. More honest, perhaps.

The boy continued working. Every morning at the same time, every time with the same calm. He hammered, filed, and remained silent. And those who watched him said he had the same manner as the old man—that tired, upright nod before doing something difficult.

Some came to buy something. A knife, a nail, a piece of iron they needed. But many simply came to stand there. They didn't talk. They just watched the fire.

And those who stayed long enough realized that it was no longer just warmth. It was memory, condensed into embers.

One day, a child stood in the doorway. Thin, ragged, with wide eyes. "What are you doing?" he asked. "I'm working." "Why?" The boy—now a man—thought for a moment. Then he said, "Because no one else is."

The child stayed there all afternoon. He watched the metal glow, the sparks rise, flash briefly, and disappear. "Does it hurt?" he asked at some point. "Sometimes." "So why do you do it?" "Because it's real."

The child nodded. No further questions. In the evenings, he helped push the embers and stack the wood. He laughed when a flame briefly flared up. The boy grinned. "Well, you see—it's alive."

When the child later left, a bit of warmth remained. Not from the fire. From the moment. And in that moment, the boy knew it would continue like this. Not in songs, not in fame. In work. In attitude. In the way of doing things without having to sugarcoat them.

The next day the child returned. And the day after that. He spoke little, laughed rarely, and learned quickly. After weeks, he asked, "What was the name of the one who taught you that?" The boy hesitated. Then he said, "One who was never holy."

The child nodded. "That's good."

And somewhere over Kattegat, amidst the smoke and cold, a wind blew up, causing the fire to flare up briefly. Not loudly, not much. Just enough to be visible if you looked.

Some later said they had seen a face in the embers. Others said that was nonsense. But no one denied that the fire burned brighter since the old man had left.

Many years later, Kattegat was a different city. New halls, new faces, new gods. Everything smoother, cleaner, louder. But the forge still stood. She just stood there—old, crooked, still. Like a tooth that time had forgotten to pull.

The fire still burned. Sometimes weakly, sometimes wildly, depending on who was in front of it. No one knew exactly how long it had been there. No one asked anymore. It was simply part of the city, like the sea or the wind.

Children played nearby. They threw stones, laughed, and ran away. One day, a girl stopped. She looked inside, for a long time, as if she recognized something the others had missed.

"Why's it burning?" she asked. An old man passing by shrugged. "Because it's always been like this." "And who did it?" "Nobody knows anymore."

The girl nodded, went closer, and held her hands over the embers. The warmth was real. No trick, no magic. Just fire. Just life.

And at that moment, very briefly, she heard a quiet laugh. Not creepy, not loud—just that honest, tired laugh that sounds like someone has finally understood how ridiculous and beautiful it all is.

She grinned. Not because she understood, but because it felt right. Then she turned around and ran back to the others.

Behind her the flame flickered, briefly brighter, then calm, even, patient.

And somewhere, in the way the wind blew through the streets, there was something that couldn't be explained. No name. No prayer. Just a feeling.

A feeling that said:

"I was never holy—but I was there."

The fire continued to breathe. And so did the world.

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