

Siegfried the Dragon Slayer

A heroic saga like in a blood frenzy



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Prologue: No Hero, Just a Man

If someone tells you there are heroes, they've either had too much to drink or they're trying to sell you something. Heroes are stories for children and for men who are afraid of the night. Fairy tales invented to shed a little light on the mess we're all in.

By the fire, that's where it's born: A man raises his voice, the smoke fills his nose, the barrels are almost empty. Then someone shouts: "Siegfried! The dragon slayer!" And suddenly everyone has something to brag about. But the truth isn't in the song; it's in the dirt. The truth stinks of dung, of cold sweat, of rusty iron, and of the mouths of horses that defecate in the streets where the children play.

Siegfried was no hero. He was a brat from Xanten. Nothing more. A brat with big fists and an even bigger mouth. People act as if he was destined to be extraordinary from the start. Nonsense. He was born screaming like everyone else. Blood, amniotic fluid, a child gasping for air. No ray of light, no gods, no prophecy. Just the stench of a cramped hut on the Rhine.

His father beat him when he wasn't tough enough. His mother kept her mouth shut because talking didn't change anything. That's how you grow up when the world doesn't owe you anything. The men drank, the women toiled, and the children learned early on that one tooth less wasn't the end. It was a beginning.

Siegfried learned quickly. He could take blows, hit back, even harder, even harder. If someone was bigger, he'd jump at their throat. If someone was faster, he'd bite. In Xanten, there were no rules except: Don't let yourself be kicked, or kick back harder. That's how he became. Not through myths, not through dragons, not through magic. Through hunger, through dirt, and through the desire to want more than his neighbor.

And he always wanted more. To eat until his stomach was full. To drink until his head was pounding. To love until his skin was sore. To fight until someone was lying down. He absorbed everything that filled him, as if he knew it would all dry up eventually.

People say he was invulnerable. Ha! Any body will break if you hit it hard enough. He wasn't invulnerable. But he was too damn stubborn to fall down when others were already down. He always got back up. With a bloody lip, a broken tooth, a swollen fist. And he grinned while he did it. That damn grin that said, "Come on, give me more."

The bards turned them into heroic tales. But if you look closely, there's no hero. There's just a man who wanted too much and for whom everything was too little. A man who laughed while he fell and remained silent when he won.

The world doesn't love such men. It tolerates them for a while, perhaps celebrating them as long as they dance. But in the end, it waits in the shadows, sharpening the knife and sticking it exactly where it hurts the most.

So listen to me: This isn't a heroic ballad. This isn't a hymn. This is the story of a man who thought he could drink the world up, beat it up, fuck it, and outlive it. And maybe he did, for a while. But in the end—in the end, the world takes everything away from everyone.

And if you read on, you'll realize: Siegfried was no hero. He was just a man. But a man who burned as if every night were his last.

Childhood in Xanten

Xanten was no place for dreams. It was a spot on the Rhine where the morning fog hung deeper than hope. A small town, wedged between fields and water, full of people who had to work too hard and had too little. The alleys were narrow, the stench pungent. Horse manure, sweat, smoke from the blacksmiths, piss-warm rivulets between the wooden houses. Those who grew up here learned early to swallow the filth.

Siegfried was one of those brats. Too big for his age, too loud, too quick with his fists. Even as a child, he had shoulders like a young bull. But that didn't make him popular; it made him dangerous. And people didn't like danger. So they kept their distance or tried to break him.

His father, a blacksmith, wasn't a man of many words. Words were for the weak. He spoke with fists and iron. If Siegfried didn't hold the hammer tight enough, he'd receive a slap in the face, harder than any tool. "Toughness doesn't come from stories," he once barked, "Toughness comes from endurance." Siegfried learned that quickly. Blisters on his hands, skin raw from soot, arms heavy as lead, and yet he kept going.

The children on the street were no better. There were no friends, only enemies. Every encounter could end in a fight. Someone would pull on a sleeve, someone would laugh too loudly, and the first fist would fly. Siegfried

learned that teeth were just as good for biting as they were for grinning. He spat blood and laughed. Not because it was fun, but because it confused the others. Those who laughed while bleeding eventually left him alone.

The nights weren't much better. The huts smelled of mold and cold porridge. The fire smoldered, the rats gnawed, and outside the wind howled over the Rhine. His mother stuffed him into an old fur so he wouldn't freeze and told stories of kings and princes, as if there was a better life out there somewhere. Siegfried listened, but he didn't believe a word. He saw the dirt on the floor, he smelled the stench, he heard the blows next door when a man had once again looked too deeply into the barrel. This was the truth. Not a fairy tale.

But something burned deep inside him. A hunger greater than the piece of bread he had in the morning. He saw the men in the tavern, drinking, laughing, making noise – and he knew: This wasn't enough. He wanted more. More than Xanten, more than blacksmiths' hammers and fights in the alley. He wanted to tear the world to pieces if it didn't give him what he wanted.

It started harmlessly: small tests of courage. Swimming across the river when the current was too strong. Climbing trees until the branches cracked. Fighting three at a time. And again and again that grin that said, "Well, is that all there is?" The others hated him for it. But they also followed him. Because he always kept going where they had long since given up.

At twelve, he could already swing a hammer like a man. At thirteen, he bore wounds that cost others their lives. At fourteen, he drank his first mug of beer—and slugged it down like water. His father looked at him and just nodded. No recognition, no praise, just a silent nod: The boy would survive.

But survival wasn't enough. Anger grew within Siegfried. Against the confines, against the stench, against the limits the world imposed on him. He felt something boiling inside him, hotter than iron in a forge. Not just muscles, not just rage—but the will to bring the whole damned world to its knees.

And so it began. Not with dragons, not with treasure, not with glory. It began in Xanten, in the streets full of filth and screaming. There grew up a boy who refused to learn how to conform. There grew up a boy who would one day make the world tremble.

A blacksmith apprentice with fists

The forge was no place for childhood dreams. It was a hellhole. Fire, smoke, iron that screamed when the hammer struck it. Every breath tasted of soot, every drop of sweat stung the eyes. For most boys in Xanten, the forge was a place to earn a few coins. For Siegfried, it became a second home—a shithole that made him tougher than any opponent.

His father was the blacksmith. A bull of a man, with shoulders like an ox and eyes as cold as the iron he worked. He didn't talk much. Words were soft. He had a hammer and a fist, and that was enough for him. If the boy didn't pull, he'd get a cracking blow on the shoulder. "Harder, damn it! You want to live or not?" That was a lesson. No patience, no praise, just blows, fire, and orders.

Siegfried swallowed the soot and the pain. He stood beside the anvil, the hammer heavy as a sin in his hands, and he learned to strike. Again and again. Iron upon iron, blow upon blow. His hands bled, his fingers burst, his skin turned callous. But he grinned. He grinned because every blow showed him he was getting stronger. That he could grow, until even the hammer feared him.

The other apprentices avoided him. At first, they laughed at the loud-mouthed brat. But the laughter stopped when one of them tried to push him in the yard. Siegfried grabbed him, threw him into the dirt, sat on him, and pounded on his face with his fists—rhythmically, like an anvil. Boom. Boom. Boom. Blood and earth, a rhythm like blacksmithing. The masters pulled him down, otherwise he wouldn't have stopped. From that day on, everyone knew: You don't mess with Siegfried.

He grew up in this hell like a damned gladiator. Every tendon, every muscle forged in fire, every blow a threat to the world. Iron by day, fists by night. When the other apprentices went to the river to cool off, Siegfried stayed behind, drenched in sweat, hammer in hand until his arms trembled and the ground was covered in drops. He didn't want to be good. He wanted to be the best. He wanted no one to speak his name without fear in their throat.

And when he did leave the workshop, it wasn't to go home peacefully. He roamed the streets like a wolf, always looking for a reason to let his fists do the talking. A wrong remark? Boom. A sideways glance? Boom. Someone who stood in his way? Boom. People soon said he was more hammer than man. Always on top, whether iron or bone.

But in this rage, in this constant hitting, lay his heart. He wasn't a thug who went at it blindly. He hit with intelligence, with rhythm. He hit to show: I'm here. I'm stronger. I'm the damn Siegfried.

So he became known—not as an apprentice, not as the blacksmith's son, but as the boy with the fists. The brat who shaped iron and broke bones as if they were one and the same. The bard would have said, "A hero is born in the smithy." But the truth was: He was a boy who had learned that everything soft breaks. And that only the hardest blow keeps the world going.

Siegfried learned more than just metal in the smithy. He learned that the world is an anvil and every person is a hammer or a piece of iron. And he swore to himself: He would never be the iron. Never.

The longing for more

Xanten couldn't hold him. It was a city that was nothing more than a few alleys, a market square, a church ringing rusty bells, and a river carrying its secrets. For most people, that was enough. They were born, they worked, they died, and the world kept turning without anyone ever mentioning their name again.

But not for Siegfried.

He was young, and already too big for the narrow streets. When he walked through the alleys, people had to make way. Not because he demanded it, but because he was taking up space, simply because. And yet he felt the walls closing in on him. The city was a cage, and he was an animal who had long since jumped against the bars.

At night, he lay on his straw mattress, which stank of sweat and old hay, and stared into the darkness. He heard the rats in the walls, the Rhine rushing outside, his father's snoring—and he felt his heart pounding as if it wanted to burst through his ribs. He didn't dream of rest. He dreamed of greatness. Of noise, of blood, of glory. Of something that transcended the river fog.

During the day, he felt it in every task. The hammer in his hand had become too light. The iron he forged was just iron, not fate. He could make swords, yes. But he wanted to wield them, not just shape them. He wanted to see them cut, not see them hang on a shelf, polished and useless.

Sometimes he went out into the fields when the sky hung low and the crows cawed. He looked into the distance, where the clouds ate the horizon, and he knew: There was more out there. Cities bigger than Xanten. Men stronger than him. Women who didn't just look at him, but challenged him. Enemies who wouldn't back down when he struck. Everything he needed to stay alive.

And he hated those who were content. The old miller who ground his grain every day, grinning as if life were nothing more than dust and bread. The merchants who argued over copper pieces as if that were the meaning of existence. The women who carried water all day and gave birth at night, only to carry water again in the morning. For him, that wasn't life. It was waiting for death.

Siegfried wanted more. More than work. More than dirt. More than this damned river. He wanted the world to feel his name like a slap in the face. To know him, to fear him, to sing him, whether they wanted to or not.

Sometimes he imagined himself marching through the streets of a strange city. People whispered, children stared, women smiled, men stepped aside. He saw himself in battle, bloodied, laughing, while others lay on the ground. He saw himself in markets, with gold in his pockets and wine in his stomach. And he saw himself with a woman at his side, stronger than any woman from Xanten, who looked at him as if he were not just a man, but a storm.

But it was only an idea. And the more he dreamed about it, the more it consumed him. The village was a trap, and he was the beast running rampant within it.

"There has to be more," he muttered one evening as he stood alone in the courtyard, hammer in hand, the sky turning red. "Damn it, there has to be more."

And he knew he would find it. Or break himself.

The longing didn't strike him like a sudden flash of lightning. It crept into him slowly, like the smoke from the forge that never left his lungs. Siegfried noticed it in the days that dragged on like old chewing gum. One blow to the iron, the hundredth, the thousandth. Sparks flew, metal bent, the rhythm was the same. It was work. It was survival. But it wasn't life.

Once, late one afternoon, he stood by the Rhine. The fog hung heavy over the water, and the sun's light refracted in the waves. Fishing boats drifted lazily,

men hauled nets full of fish that stank of death. For them, it was a rich catch; for him, it was simply a picture of stagnation. They were dragging their lives out of the water; he wanted to throw them out, as far as possible, to the ends of the damned earth.

An old fisherman noticed his gaze. "Don't dream so far, boy," he croaked, "the river takes anyone who wants too much of it." Siegfried didn't answer. But he was seething inside. He didn't want to hear that he should resign himself. That Xanten was everything. No. He didn't want to become one of those men whose skin smelled of salt and sweat and whose eyes were empty because they had never seen more than the next flood.

The nights grew worse. He lay there, his heart racing, his thoughts roaring. Sometimes he got up, went outside, and ran barefoot through the mud. The moon cast silver flecks on the Rhine, and he felt that the world was bigger than this small piece of earth. He clenched his fists as if he could grab the sky itself and tear it apart.

Once, he got into a fight with a farmhand, a broad-shouldered fellow twice his age. The man mocked him, calling him a brat with too much hunger in his stomach. Siegfried just grinned, stepped forward, and struck. The first blow made the man stagger, the second drew blood from his nose, the third left him sprawling in the dust. The others saw it, and in their faces was something he loved: fear. He absorbed it like air.

But even the others' fear didn't calm him. It was sweet, yes. But it vanished too quickly. The next day, he looked back into the alleys, back into the same faces, back into the same miserable huts. Nothing changed. Everything remained the same. And that was worse than any defeat.

Sometimes, when he could afford it, he sat in the inn. He listened to the stories the travelers told. Of cities whose walls were higher than any house in Xanten. Of courts where kings dined with dozens of knights. Of wars from which men returned with both glory and scars. Siegfried drank their words as if they were wine. He didn't just listen—he absorbed everything, every detail, every sound. He wanted it, he wanted to be there, wanted to shout his name into the strange streets until people knew him.

Once he asked one of the strangers: "And what about the men who die in these wars?" The stranger just laughed. "They're quickly forgotten." Siegfried remained silent, but inside he felt a burning emotion: He didn't want to be forgotten. Never.

There were nights when he sat on the old city wall, his knees drawn up, his gaze far out. He saw the lights of villages flickering in the distance, heard dogs barking, the howling of the wind. And over and over again, the same thought: *That can't be all.*

And he swore to himself: Someday he would leave Xanten behind. Someday he would grab the world, pull it by the hair, and throw it to the ground, just as he threw every opponent to the ground. And if he died in the process—then at least he would die with noise, with blood, with fire. Not silently, not forgotten, not in the shadow of this damned little place.

The longing wasn't a dream. It was a knife. And the older he grew, the deeper it cut into him.

One evening, when the streets of Xanten were already dark and only the sparks from the forges pierced the night, a stranger entered the city. A rider, his armor scratched, his face wrinkled as if scarred by a thousand battles. He bore no coat of arms, no colors, only the smell of dust and long journeys.

The children ran after him like dogs. The old people looked suspicious, the women whispered, but Siegfried remained rooted to the spot. He had never seen a man like him. Not the blacksmith with his broad arms, not the fisherman with his calloused hands, but someone who came from far away. Someone who had seen the world.

In the inn, the stranger sat down at a table and ordered wine and meat. The money he placed in the bank shone brighter than anything the people of Xanten had ever seen. They stared as if they had never seen silver before.

Siegfried pushed his way through the crowd and took a seat opposite. He was still half a boy, but his shoulders already looked like those of a man. He stared into the stranger's eyes while the others quieted down.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

The stranger chewed, drank, and made him wait. Then he said roughly: "From where men earn more in one day than they see in a lifetime in your town. From where the castles are high and the women proud. Where fame isn't made of stories, but of blood."

The words hit Siegfried like blows. He pictured it before his eyes, even though he had never seen it: walls rising into the sky, torches illuminating the streets, men fighting until the ground ran red.

“And what about the weak?” he asked.

The stranger laughed, an ugly, hoarse laugh. "We'll kick them aside."

Siegfried clenched his fists under the table. There it was again, that pulling in his chest, that burning sensation he couldn't shake at night.

“And those who fall?” he asked.

The stranger drank and looked at him for a long time. "They are dust on the side of the road. Nameless. No one sings of them. Only of those who stand upright."

It was like a punch in the gut. Siegfried knew at that moment: He wouldn't be dust on the side of the road. He wouldn't rot in Xanten like the fishermen, the millers, the poor devils who toiled from morning to night and then died without anyone remembering them.

At some point, the stranger stood up, paid, and left. The crowd watched him with their eyes until he disappeared into the darkness. For everyone else, it was a brief visit, an evening with some excitement. For Siegfried, it was a revelation.

He remained sitting at the table for a long time, his face in shadow, his fists pressed firmly onto the bench.

"Someday," he murmured, "they'll whisper my name. Not in Xanten. Not here. Everywhere."

The wine in his glass suddenly tasted sweeter. His hunger grew stronger. And his longing – insatiable.

First fights, first scars

It began, like so many things, with a stupid look. The market in Xanten was packed, vendors shouted their wares, the air stank of fish, cheese, and horse manure. Farmers, women, and children crowded between the stalls. And in the middle of it all stood Siegfried, sixteen years old, broad as an ox, restless as a caged wolf.

A servant, older, strong, with scarred arms, nudged him aside. Siegfried didn't budge. The man turned around and looked him up and down. "Get out of my way, brat," he growled.

Siegfried grinned. "Make room yourself."

That was enough. The servant grabbed him by the shirt, but before he could react, Siegfried smashed his forehead into his face. It cracked like a branch in a fire. Blood spurted, the man's nose broke, and the crowd retreated.

The fight began.

The servant roared, punched Siegfried with his fist, but Siegfried ducked, rammed his shoulder into his stomach, and threw him into the dirt. Dust flew, people screamed. The man scrambled to his feet and drew a knife. Now it was serious.

Siegfried felt his heart racing. Not the sweat of fear—adrenaline. He loved it. Finally. Finally, something other than anvil and hammer.

The servant brandished, stabbing. The blade ripped open Siegfried's forearm. A hot pain, blood flowed, dripping into the dust. For the first time, he saw his own blood in battle. For a moment, he was surprised—then he laughed. Loud, raw, mad.

"Come on! Do it again!" he yelled.

The man hesitated, and that was his fault. Siegfried leaped forward, grabbed his wrist, twisted it so hard the bones cracked, and knocked the knife out of his hand. With his other fist, he lashed out. One blow, two, three. Each blow was a thunderous crash. The man's face turned to mush, his teeth flew like loose stones, blood splattered on Siegfried's shirt.

The crowd screamed. Some cheered him on, others stepped back in disgust and horror. But no one dared to stop him.

He didn't stop. He hit until his knuckles burst, until the skin tore on the iron teeth, until the man was just wheezing. Then he pushed himself away, breathing heavily, feeling the blood dripping from his arm, warm and sticky.

He looked at the people, one after the other. No one returned his gaze. They looked away, the way you look away when you see something that doesn't fit into your life. Something too wild. Something too real.

Siegfried laughed. A laugh that came from the depths, dark and dangerous. "Who else wants it?" he roared. No one answered.

That was the day he received his first scar. A cut on his arm that never fully healed. But more important was what he carried with him: the knowledge that blood was addictive. That pain didn't stop him, but fueled him. That he was more alive in battle than ever before.

Later, he washed himself in the river. The water turned red, his hands trembled from the intoxication. He saw the scar on his arm, rubbed it, felt the pain—and grinned. "More," he murmured. "More."

From that day on, Xanten was too small. People looked at him, whispered his name, some fearfully, some admiringly. But it was clear to him: This was just the beginning. The world would get to know him. And it would bleed.

The servant was still lying in the dust when the crowd began to stir again. One pulled him up, wiped the blood from his face, others stared at Siegfried as if they had realized for the first time that an animal was growing up in this city that didn't belong in a stable.

"That brat is crazy," someone muttered. "No," another replied, "he's stronger than anyone here."

Siegfried heard it and it tasted like sweet wine to him.

That evening, he sat in the smithy. His father saw the bloody knuckles, the slashed arm, the eyes full of fire. He didn't say a word. No praise, no reprimand. Just a brief glance that betrayed something like silent recognition. Then he pressed a piece of cloth into his hand. "Wrap it around yourself. Tomorrow you'll work again." That was all.

But outside, in the alleys, things began to ferment. Children whispered his name, women whispered while fetching water. "Siegfried beat the servant to a pulp," it was said. "He laughed while he bled." And each repetition of the story made him greater, fiercer, more invincible.

The scar on his arm was healing slowly. It burned at night when he threw himself onto the straw mattress, and he stroked it with his fingers as if he wanted to feel it again and again. It wasn't a mark of shame—it was proof. He had tasted blood, and he now knew he liked it.

He began to seek out fights. Not always at the market, not always in public. Sometimes behind the smithy, when another boy talked too much. Sometimes in the fields, when someone thought they could make fun of him. Sometimes just for fun, out of boredom. Every fight left its mark. Bruises, broken lips, scratches on his face. Small scars that his body collected like other people collect coins.

And each time he felt more alive.

One night, in the inn, a few men from the neighboring village were sitting at the table. Farmers, sturdy, fueled by beer. Siegfried glanced over, and one of them hissed: "What are you staring at, brat?" Siegfried stood up and walked over. "I'm staring because you're ugly."

That was enough. Chairs flew, fists crashed. It was a carnage of splinters, beer mugs, blood, and roars. Siegfried beat two men down at once, felt kicks in the back, blows to the ribs, but he laughed—always that damned laughter that sapped the others' courage. In the end, three peasants were lying on the ground, and he was standing, covered in blood but grinning. The innkeeper screamed, the guests stared, and Siegfried's story continued to grow.

"The kid fights like a bear." "No, worse. A bear will eventually fall over. He won't stop."

The scars multiplied. Small cuts on his arms, a laceration above his eye, a missing tooth. But each new pain was like a trophy to him. He looked into the mirror of a polished sword and grinned: There was no longer a brat. There was a fighter.

And somewhere deep within him, the certainty grew: If Xanten could no longer hold him, he would fight for his place out there. With fists, with blood, with laughter.

Because what he had learned was simple: The world doesn't belong to the strong. It belongs to those who always get up, no matter how bloody they are on the ground. And Siegfried swore to himself: He would never stay down.

The Dragon in the Forest

The forest around Xanten was not a friendly place. No place for walks, no place for songs. It was an endless tangle of dense trees, wet shadows, and sounds that kept you awake at night. Wolves howled, wild boars grunted, and

sometimes there was something else. A hiss that didn't come from an animal. A rumble that crept into the ground.

The elders whispered about it around the fire. "A dragon," they said, "a beast that dwells in the forest. Bigger than three horses, with eyes like fire." Most laughed, drank, and spat into the fire. But some fell silent, and that was enough to fuel the legend.

Siegfried heard the stories, and something burned inside him. A dragon. Whether true or a lie—it didn't matter. He felt he had to know. He needed something greater than any servant, greater than any fight.

One evening he set out. Alone, without a word. No friend, no companion. Only a sword he had taken from the forge, still hot from the last blow, not even quite finished. The sky hung heavy, the forest swallowed him.

He trudged through the mud for hours, listening to the cracking of branches and the roar of the wind. The deeper he went, the thicker the air became. It was as if the forest itself were breathing.

Then he heard it. A hiss. Deep, rumbling, like thunder beneath the earth. His heart leaped into his throat. But he didn't back down. He grinned. Finally.

Between the trees, he saw something. Something large. A movement, a body writhing like a snake, eyes glowing in the darkness. Perhaps it was an overgrown wild boar, perhaps a bear, perhaps a damned nightmare. But at that moment, for Siegfried, it was the dragon.

The beast lunged forward. A mouth full of teeth, dripping saliva, a stench of blood and mold. Siegfried raised his sword. The thing leaped, throwing him to the ground, claws ripping across his shoulder, blood spurting. He screamed—not in fear, but in rage.

He rammed the sword into the beast's side. It roared, a sound that shook the forest. Warm blood splashed onto its face, burning its eyes. Siegfried laughed, laughing like a madman as he stabbed deeper, again and again, until the thing writhed like a rope in fire.

It bit, teeth ripped at his leg, he felt the flesh tear open. But he didn't let go of the sword. He hammered with his fist, with the hilt, with everything he had, until bones cracked. The ground was a morass of blood and mud.

Finally, the beast lay still. Its chest no longer rose and fell. Siegfried gasped, blood dripping from his forehead, his arm scratched, his leg covered in bites. He stood up, staggering, his sword red to the hilt, and roared at the sky so loudly that even the crows took flight.

Later, as he walked back through the forest, trailing the corpse of a dead "dragon" behind him—perhaps a monstrous wild boar, perhaps something no one could name—he knew the story would take on a life of its own.

The next day, people were heard talking. "Siegfried has slain the dragon." No one asked what he looked like. No one wanted to know if he was a dragon or an animal. The scar on his leg, the scratches on his arm, the blood he still hadn't washed off—they were proof enough.

And so it began. From a bloody and lonely battle in the forest, a legend grew. A legend that was passed on, magnified, glorified, and distorted. But Siegfried knew the truth: It wasn't a fairy tale, it was just blood, pain, and madness. And that's precisely why it was real.

The morning smelled of smoke when Siegfried returned. His shirt was in tatters, his arm bandaged with a piece of cloth already soaking wet with blood. On his shoulder hung what he had dragged from the forest—a massive carcass, heavy as sin, dragging along the ground, leaving a trail of blood and dirt through the alleys.

The people saw him coming. First the children, who stood there with their mouths open. Then the women, who crossed themselves as if they had seen the devil. Finally, the men, who stopped talking, lowered their mugs, and stared.

It wasn't a pretty sight. The thing—pig, bear, beast, no one could say for sure—was torn to pieces, covered in cuts, its mouth ripped open, its eyes still glowing with death. But that was precisely what made it larger than life. In this carcass, they saw what they wanted: a dragon.

"Siegfried..." whispered one. "He slew the beast." The words went through the crowd like fire.

Siegfried threw the dead thing in front of the inn as if it were nothing more than a sack of grain. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, smearing more blood into his hair than off it. Then he looked at the people surrounding him.

"That's your dragon," he growled. "And he's dead."

Silence. No one laughed, no one doubted. For there he stood, covered in blood, bruised, but with a grin so wild that even the bravest looked away.

The innkeeper stepped out and stared at the carcass. "By all the gods... boy, what have you done?"

Siegfried shrugged. "I fought. I survived. You don't need to know anything more."

The children ran and shouted through the streets: "Siegfried! The dragon slayer!" And just like that, he had his name.

By evening, the carcass was still standing in the square in front of the inn. Flies had already settled on it, dogs secretly licked the blood until they were chased away with stones. But no one dared to remove the thing. It was more than a dead animal—it was a monument.

Siegfried sat inside the inn, his arm heavily bandaged, his leg stiff, his face smeared with scabs and dirt. Before him stood jugs as big as children's heads, filled with dark wine.

People talked, they shouted, they boasted—but they kept looking at him. "The dragon slayer," they whispered. "The brat from Xanten... has taken on death itself."

Siegfried grinned, reached for the first jug. He raised it, the wood sticky with spilled wine, and drank deeply, slowly, until half of it was gone. The pain in his arm throbbed, the blood still seeped through the bandages, but with each sip it grew warmer, duller, sweeter.

"At the dragon!" one shouted. "No," Siegfried growled, his voice cutting through the noise. "At me."

A brief moment of silence. Then they all raised their mugs, and the hall shook. "To Siegfried!"

The second jug came, then the third. The wine flowed like blood, and he drank it in, as greedily as he drank the fight. Soon his laughter was louder than the rest, raw and full like the roar in the forest. Someone sang a song, someone banged on the table, jugs broke, and his name hung over it all.

He felt the intoxication mask the pain, the scars numb. He felt the wine fuel the flames within him, not extinguish them. And while the dead carcass outside smelled like hell itself in the night, Siegfried silently swore to himself: This was just the beginning.

He drank until his hands shook, until his head was buzzing, until the room swayed around him. And he grinned, that crazy grin people would quote for years to come.

Because he knew: Blood makes you a man. But wine makes you a legend.

The blood that changes everything

The blood wouldn't go away. He washed his hands in the Rhine, scrubbed his skin until it was raw, but the smell remained. Iron, sweat, animal. It was as if the filthy beast had sunk its teeth not just into his flesh, but into his entire damned soul. He smelled it when he slept, when he ate, when he entered the smithy. Blood in the water, blood in his dreams, blood in every wrinkle of his hands.

And the crazy thing was: he didn't want to get rid of it. He liked it. It was proof that he was more than the dull peasants who spent their lives pulling fish from the river or weaving baskets until they died with bent backs. His blood, the Beast's, mixed in the dirt—that was his ID. He grinned when he thought about it: *I fought. I bled. I'm alive.*

The people did the rest. "Siegfried, the dragon slayer!" the children shouted as he walked down the alleys. The old people shook their heads, but they whispered just as loudly. And in the inn, it wasn't even a night before a bard plucked his lute and played a melody over it. Of course, he was lying. The dragon suddenly breathed fire, was twice as big as he really was, had iron scales and eyes like two hell-blazing lamps. But no one wanted to hear the truth. Lies tasted better, and lies are as cheap as bad wine—they always sell.

Siegfried sat in the corner, bloody bandages on his arm, his shoulder stiff, his leg swollen with bite marks. Before him were jugs full of wine, heavy and dark. He lifted them one after the other, emptied them, and slammed them on the table, making the people jump. "To me!" he shouted, and the crowd responded, hesitantly at first, then louder: "To Siegfried!"

He absorbed it like poison. The stares, the awe, the whispering. He was the same brat—but he felt bigger. Every sip of wine made him heavier, more powerful, more indomitable. The pain in his arm? Drowned. The throbbing in his leg? Smothered in alcohol. The laughter of the crowd? A second heartbeat in his chest.

Later, as he was already staggering, an old farmer approached him. Gray-haired, thin, with eyes that had seen too much. "Be careful, boy," he murmured. "Blood changes you. It makes you different. It eats you from the inside." Siegfried looked at him, slurred, grinned. "Blood? Blood is life. And wine is proof that it's fun." Then he laughed, a hoarse, wild laugh that made everyone in the hall shudder.

The women whispered, "He's dangerous." The men said, "He's more powerful than us." And the children jumped around, shouting, "Dragon Slayer!"

That night, amidst the jugs, the smell of blood, and smoke, the boy from Xanten died. Someone else remained behind. Someone who could no longer be satisfied with brawls in the courtyard or fights in the market. Someone who tasted blood like others taste honey.

He finally lay down, his head heavy, his belly full of wine, his bandages soaked. And as the dead carcass rotted outside in the moonlight, he murmured, half delirious, half dreamy: "I am invincible. The world shall come. I stand."

And he believed it. He believed it so much that the wine burned in his veins like an oath.

Blood made him a man. Wine made him a legend. And both together made him dangerous.

The Linden Leaf

Siegfried believed he was indestructible. The blows he took were trophies. The cuts, the scars, the blood—all just proof that he was tougher than the rest. He

didn't boast, he lived it. And people shut up when he came. An entire village gave way to a boy who was no longer just a boy.

But the truth is: no body is indestructible. There's always a point where the knife cuts deeper, where the blood just keeps flowing. You just don't notice it if you're too busy being big.

It happened casually. Almost ridiculously. A hot summer day, the forest silent. Siegfried lay by the river, his back leaning against a root, his sword beside him, his skin still raw from the fighting of the past few weeks. Above him rustled a linden tree, old and broad, its branches heavy with green leaves.

He fell asleep. The wine in his stomach, the heat on his skin, the quiet buzzing of insects. He slept deeply, deeply, as only someone who believes nothing can happen to him can sleep.

A leaf fell away. Small, inconspicuous, like a joke of nature. It floated slowly down, danced in the wind, twisted, fluttered—and landed on his bare shoulder. A tiny shadow, barely noticeable.

Siegfried didn't even wake up. He tossed and turned, murmured, and laughed in his sleep. The leaf clung to his damp skin as the sun continued to burn.

When he awoke, he felt only the pain of the old wounds, the throbbing of the scars, the hunger in his stomach. He stood up, stretched, and carelessly wiped the sheet away. He had no idea that in that moment it had taken something away from him—the perfect hardness, the protection he had imagined.

From then on, there was a spot. Small. Invisible. Weak.

And as inconspicuous as it was, it was there. Like a needle in the flesh that you can't find right away. A whisper in the back of your mind: *Not everything is unbreakable.*

Legend later sang of dragon's blood and a linden leaf that prevented immortality. They added pathos, divine whims, and fate. But the naked truth was banal. A man, drunk on wine, fell asleep by a river, a leaf accidentally falling on his skin. Nothing more.

But that's precisely what made it so cruel. Not the dragon, not the sword, not the world. A damned leaf.

Siegfried later laughed about it when he heard the story. He laughed because he believed nothing and no one could kill him. But on quiet nights, when the wine didn't help and the scars burned, he sometimes placed his hand on his shoulder, exactly where the skin felt different.

And then he fell silent.

The invisibility cloak and its burden

Some say the invisibility cap was a gift from the gods. A magical cloak that made Siegfried invisible, invincible, stronger than all others. Blah blah blah. Poetical bullshit.

The truth: He found it not in a temple, but in a cave. Not a blessing, but booty. Blood clung to it, old blood, dried, black as tar. The edges were ragged, the leather hardened with the sweat of a corpse. It smelled as if ten men had perished inside. No miracle, no splendor—just a cloak, heavy as a tomcat and sticky as guilt.

Siegfried took it anyway. Why? Because he took everything he could get. He was greedy, addicted to more. More power, more intoxication, more glory. So he hoisted the damned thing over his shoulders.

And he felt it immediately: It wasn't joy. Not triumph. It was a burden. As the leather fell on his skin, a coldness crept into him that even fire couldn't dispel. He was invisible, yes. But he also felt hollow, hollowed out, as if the coat had sucked a piece of himself out of him.

Legends make this into a gift. "Siegfried could make himself invisible, he could change his shape and power." But no one sings about the price. No one talks about how he lay sleepless in the dirt afterward, feeling as if the shadows were consuming him.

No one says how difficult it became to distinguish between oneself and the emptiness beneath the cloak.

It was as if he'd lost control the moment he wore the invisibility cap. He struck harder, faster, more viciously. Not because he wanted to—but because she wanted him to. Yes, that piece of cursed leather was hungry, and Siegfried fed it with fists, blood, and screams.

Outwardly, he was now more than a man. People saw him fighting, saw him move like a shadow through the crowd, how he split, how he was everywhere and nowhere. They saw a hero. But in truth, it was nothing but madness.

After a fight, he took off his cap, threw it into the corner, breathed heavily, and looked at his hands. Blood. Always blood. He no longer knew how many blows came from him and how many from this thing. He smelled the old blood in the leather, and he swore it had multiplied. As if the invisibility cap was drinking.

And yet he couldn't let go. Because power is addictive. Because he lied to himself that he was the master and not the servant.

So he carried on wearing it. Again and again. And every time he put it down, there was this hole in his chest, a dull ache, like a drunken stupor that's worn off. He needed it. Like others need wine.

Thus, the invisibility cloak became not his weapon, but his burden. And the burden weighed heavier than any sword.

The Treasure of the Nibelungs

The Nibelung treasure—people still sing about it today, as if it were the golden ticket to paradise. Gold, jewels, rings, swords, enough to build ten kingdoms. And you know what? Gold is just metal. Hard, cold, heavy. Nothing more. But people—they'll rot for a piece of it. They murder, they betray, they sell their own mothers just to have a few shiny coins in their pockets.

Siegfried didn't find it because he was looking. He stumbled upon it. A cursed hiding place in a damned cave, deep in the forest, where even the crows dare not tread. The air stank of mold, of damp stone, of something old that should never see the light of day. And there it lay: the treasure. Piles upon piles. Gold glowing in the torchlight, rings that felt cold, as if they were alive. A mountain of metal so heavy it overwhelmed the room.

Legends say it was a gift. Nonsense. It was a trap. Everyone who saw it got that look—that greedy, drooling look, as if the gold were calling to them. "Mine," the eyes whispered. "All mine."

Siegfried wasn't stupid. He saw this and laughed. "A pile of tin. And yet the world will bleed for it." He threw on a bracelet, tried on a ring, sheathed a sword. It fit. Everything fit. And it felt good. Too good.

That was the beginning.

Because as soon as he touched the treasure, he was no longer just Siegfried the Brave from Xanten, or even just the dragon slayer. He was a man with a curse in his pocket. And curses have no expiration date.

He dreamed of it at night. Gold melting in his hands, rings piercing his fingers, voices whispering in his ear. "Take us... keep us... kill for us." He woke up drenched in sweat, reached for the jug of wine, and drank until the dream sank into the fog. But the voices remained.

The people who later learned about it immediately began to look at him differently. They said, "Siegfried is rich." No. He was cursed. Only someone who could sleep without the feeling that a thousand coins were lying on their chest like stones was rich.

But he didn't let go of the treasure. No one could have. Because gold has no color except the one it takes on in your eyes. For the poor, it is hope. For the powerful, it is war. For Siegfried, it was both.

He knew that with this treasure he could buy kings, seduce women, buy enemies, or have them beheaded. But deep down he also knew that with every piece he took, the treasure also took something from him.

And he drank against it. Pitchers, nights, days, no matter. But the treasure was stronger. The treasure was always there. In every corner of his gaze, in every conversation, in every dream.

Thus, Siegfried became not just the dragon slayer, not just the man with fists and scars. He became the bearer of the curse. And from then on, he knew: It wasn't the dragon, not the battles, not the blood that would ultimately break him. But the gold.

And he laughed anyway. Loudly, crudely, drunkenly. Because what else could a man like him do?

Departure to Worms

Xanten was over. Too small. Too quiet. Too fed up with his face. People were still whispering: "Siegfried the dragon slayer, Siegfried the one with the treasure, Siegfried the invincible." But the truth was: he was bored to death. Every market, every fight, every mouth he punched – it felt like a repetition. A man like him couldn't die in a town like Xanten. Not like a damned fisherman with a crooked back and an empty jug.

So he packed what he needed. The sword that had seen more than many a man. A few rings from the Nibelung treasure, heavy in his pocket, cold as stones in his stomach. And enough wine to survive the first few days on the road.

His father? His mother-in-law? Wept, quietly, as women cry when they know they cannot hold their children. They both knew: Siegfried belonged to the world outside, not to the city on the Rhine.

He left Xanten at dawn. The sky was gray, fog crept over the river, and his boots pounded the muddy path as if it were a drum announcing the beginning of something new. Behind him lay a village that could not forget him. Before him lay a world that did not yet know him—but soon would.

For days he trudged through forests, across fields, through rain, wind, and sun. He slept in the dirt, drank from puddles, and ate whatever he found or took. Sometimes he stole a farmer's bread, sometimes he stole a traveler's jug. And if anyone thought they could defend themselves, they were quickly brought to their knees. Siegfried was no pilgrim, no wanderer. He was a storm on his feet.

And then, at some point, it lay before him: Worms. A city unlike any he'd ever seen before. Walls so high they cut through the sky. Towers that gleamed in the sunlight as if coated in gold. And a noise that reached the very gates: market cries, bells, horses, voices.

He stopped, grinned, and spat in the dust. "So this is the big world," he murmured. "Well then—cheers."

He entered, and the streets swallowed him up. Merchants bellowed, whores laughed, children begged, knights in iron pushed people aside. Siegfried absorbed it like wine. This was life. Chaos, filth, money, power. He saw the castles on the horizon, saw the men in fine fabrics, saw the women with eyes

that scrutinized him, and he knew: Here he would not only survive. Here he would make history.

That evening, he sat in an inn, bigger than all the others in Xanten combined. The table was laden with meat, the jug full of wine, and the people stared at him like a stranger who was causing trouble. He laughed. He wanted them to stare. He wanted them to ask themselves: Who is the bastard sitting there, drinking, eating, as if he owned the city?

He put his feet up on the table, wiped the blood from a small fight he'd started upon entering with his forearm, and yelled, "I'm Siegfried from Xanten. I've slain dragons, I've stolen gold, I've seen more blood than you'll ever pee in your life. And now I'm here."

Silence. Then voices. Whispers. Laughter. Disbelief. And somewhere in between: awe.

That was the beginning. The beginning of the end.

The encounter with Kriemhild

Worms was loud, but in the castle courtyard everything was different. The walls stood like teeth in the sky, knights in shining armor acted as if they were untouchable, and somewhere in between moved she: Kriemhild.

She wasn't the most beautiful he'd ever seen. Not as the bards later sang – "Eyes like stars, skin like milk, lips like roses." Nonsense. She had eyes as sharp as daggers, a voice that was more command than plea, and a way of turning her head that made it clear to any man: She knew exactly what he wanted. And she knew if he was worthy.

Siegfried saw her and laughed softly. Not because she was a dream—but because he sensed she was a promise. A promise of more. More than gold, more than blood, more than wine. A woman who doesn't flee in fear when a man like him enters the room, but rather examines him, tests him, weighs him up.

Their first glances weren't flirtation. It was a struggle. He stood there, broad, dirty, still stinking of dirt and sweat from the street. She stood there, clean,

shining, wearing clothes more precious than anything he'd ever owned. Her eyes met his, and for a moment, the world seemed to stand still.

Then she smiled. Not a sweet smile. A smile that said: *You're dangerous. But maybe that's exactly what I need.*

The men at court whispered. "That's Siegfried, the stranger, the dragon slayer." Some mocked him, others feared him. But Kriemhild remained silent. She never took her eyes off him.

He approached her without a word, like a man who knows the crowd is watching. His boots clattered on the stones, his shadow fell large across the hall. He stopped close to her, so close that he smelled her breath—sweet, but with a sharpness beneath it, like the scent of a flower that can also carry poison.

"You're Kriemhild," he said, as if it were a fact, no question. She raised her eyebrows. "And you're Siegfried, the man who thinks he can get the world drunk and killed." He grinned. "So far, it's working."

The crowd laughed nervously, but their eyes remained serious. And there was more fire in that look than in any fight he had survived so far.

Later, as he sat in the hall, meat in hand, wine in his cup, the knights whispering in the shadows, he saw her again. She stood at the far end of the hall, surrounded by women giggling like sheep. But she wasn't laughing. She stared at him while he drank, while he tore the meat, while he wiped the blood from his lips. And he knew: This wasn't a game.

Kriemhild was not a prize. Not a trinket. Not a trophy. She was a test. A woman who knew how to shape men, how to break them if necessary. And that's precisely why he wanted her.

Because Siegfried was addicted to everything that resisted him. And Kriemhild—she wouldn't just kiss him. She would let him burn.

Gunther and the brothers

The court of Worms didn't smell of glory, but of power. And power stinks—of cold sweat, of fear, of wine that's been sitting in the jug too long, and of meat that could be afforded while peasants were dying outside.

Gunther, the king, sat on his chair like a man who didn't quite know how he got there. He wasn't weak—but he wasn't a lion either. More like a merchant in a crown, someone who knew how to negotiate, how to compromise, how to make others fight for him. His fingers drummed nervously on the armrest while his eyes studied Siegfried.

Gernot, the elder, was different. Broad, with eyes that were always a bit too watchful. A man who immediately recognized when someone was stronger than him—and who immediately thought about how to bring that someone down before they became dangerous. Giseler, the youngest, was little more than a boy. Handsome, smooth, with too much naivety in his features. He stared at Siegfried like a child seeing a wolf for the first time: fascinated, frightened, unsure whether to run away or chase after it.

Siegfried stood in the middle of the hall, his boots dirtied with street dirt, his scars clearly visible, his hands loosely on the hilt of his sword. He hadn't bowed upon entering, hadn't bowed his head, hadn't asked permission. He had stomped in as if the room belonged to him.

"So you're the stranger everyone's talking about," Gunther finally said. Siegfried grinned crookedly. "And you're the man who has a throne but doesn't know how to defend it."

The air in the hall grew thick. Knights along the walls instinctively reached for the hilts of their swords. But Gunther only raised a hand, a smile, half embarrassed, half curious, on his lips. "Brave," he murmured. "Or stupid."

"Sometimes it's the same thing," Siegfried replied, taking a glass of wine without asking. He drank deeply, shook himself, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "But most of the time, the brave wins. And the foolish lie in the dirt."

Gernot stepped forward, slowly, his eyes cold. "You are strong. You are loud. But you are not the king here. Don't forget that." Siegfried laughed, a harsh, short laugh. "I know a king when I see one. And you are not one. Not even half."

A murmur went through the hall. Some were horrified, some held their breath—and some grinned, enjoying the way this stranger was turning the entire order upside down.

Gunther leaned back, studying Siegfried as if considering whether this man was a threat or a gift. "Perhaps we can be of use to each other," he finally said. Siegfried nodded and took another sip. "Perhaps. But I serve no one. If you want something, speak plainly."

And in that moment, everything was said: Gunther – the king who needed men to appear strong. Gernot – the brother who immediately saw the poison. Giselher – the boy who still believed that heroes are really heroes. And Siegfried – the bastard from Xanten, who stood in their courtyard like a storm that doesn't ask a door before entering it.

The bards later sang of alliances and courtly games. But the truth was simpler: It was the evening when men who distrusted each other sat at a table. Men who needed each other, but were already looking for opportunities to betray each other.

And in the middle: Siegfried, laughing, drinking, with wine in his beard and blood in his memory. A man who came to take everything – and who had no idea that he had already met his own end at this table.

Brünhild's Test

Brünhild was not a dream, she was a threat. The bards said she was as beautiful as the dawn, with hair like gold and a body like a miracle. Screw that. The truth: She was a warrior, tall, with arms like ropes and a gaze that diminished men even before she spoke. In Iceland, it was said, she ruled a castle where only one could be king: the man who defeated her.

And no one made it. Knights, princes, bastards with golden crests—they came, they fought, they fell. Brünhild struck them down, one by one, and sent them back half-dead or left them to rot in the dirt.

Gunther wanted her. Not out of love—love was a word for the poor. He wanted her because she represented power. Whoever got Brünhild would get her land, her men, her strength. Only one problem: He wasn't strong enough. Siegfried was.

So he spun a web of intrigue. He talked, lured, promised. "Help me win her. Wear the invisibility cap for me, fight in my place. Let the world believe I'm the man who can defeat her." Siegfried laughed, deep and hard. "You want a woman who would tear you apart like a piece of meat if you tried it yourself? Fine. But if I help you, I want my price."

And so they made the pact.

The day of the trial came. Brünhild stood there, erect, holding a spear longer than three men. Her armor gleamed, her hair flowed, but that was only a facade. Rage blazed in her eyes. She was not just a woman, she was a storm, a force of nature, and she wanted to see off any man foolish enough to challenge her.

The crowd screamed, the drums boomed. Gunther stepped forward, smiling uncertainly. But beneath his cloak—invisible to all—it was Siegfried who flexed his muscles, bared his teeth, and raised his spear.

The competition began.

Brünhild threw first. Her spear hissed through the air, snapping an oak tree in two as if it were made of paper. The people screamed. Gunther—no, Siegfried—stood there, grinned, grabbed his own spear, and hurled it back. The ground shook, stones splintered, and the spear pierced the queen's shield, sending sparks flying.

Then the stones. Huge chunks that men could barely lift. Brünhild lifted one and threw it so hard that the earth cracked. She was sweating, but she laughed as she did so, raw and wild. Siegfried grabbed the next one, his muscles tensed, he roared, and the stone flew as light as an apple.

The crowd erupted. Brünhild's smile faded. For the first time, she saw that her opponent was not like the others. But she didn't know she was fighting two: Gunther's name—and Siegfried's fists.

In the end, it was deceit that defeated her. She grabbed, punched, roared, but the cloak of invisibility made the difference. An invisible punch, a kick, a grip that forced her to the ground. She fell, and the crowd cheered as if they had witnessed a miracle.

Gunther stood there, proud, his arm raised as if he himself had fought. Brünhild knelt in the dust, her chest heaved, her eyes full of fire. She knew. She knew

she had been betrayed. But she couldn't prove it. And so she remained silent, her fists clenched, her anger deep within her.

But Siegfried stood in the shadows, his heart racing, his knuckles bloodied, his breath heavy. He laughed quietly. Not because it was a fair victory—but because it wasn't. And because he knew: fairness is for weaklings.

Brünhild's eyes found him, brief, sharp, as if they had seen through the cloak of invisibility. A look that said: *I'll get you yet.*

And he grinned back.

A trick with the invisibility cloak

It wasn't the first, nor would it be the last, trick he'd pull with that damned cloak. The cloak of invisibility, heavy as sin, clung to his skin, smelling of old blood, of fear, of something that should never have been found. But it made him invisible, unstoppable. And Gunther needed him.

Brünhild wasn't convinced. She had lost, yes—officially. But everyone saw it in her face: she didn't believe in Gunther's victory. She was too proud, too wise, to swallow such a farce. And Gunther? He grinned like an idiot, as if he had conquered the world, while he was nothing more than a puppet keeping Siegfried at his back.

The wedding was imminent. Brünhild was his bride—against his will, full of rage. And everyone who saw her knew: The woman was not a prize, she was a trap.

On their wedding night, she refused. Brünhild was stronger than Gunther, strong enough to twist his arms and throw him onto the cold stone bed as if he were a child. She laughed at him as he writhed like a worm. "You are no man," she spat in his face. "You are a farce."

And Gunther did what weak men do: He cried for help.

Then Siegfried came. Again with the cap of invisibility. Again the invisible executioner. He grabbed Brünhild, threw her to the ground, and pressed her arms to the stones. She fought like a lioness, kicking, biting, screaming—but

against the invisible blow, against the raw power that came not from Gunther, but from Siegfried, she had no chance.

She reached for his throat, almost catching him, and in that moment she could have revealed everything. But he pressed harder, laughing softly as he broke her strength. Then—a blow, a grip, a sigh, and Brünhild lay still. Not defeated—just broken, for that one moment.

Gunther stepped forward, proud as a peacock, and acted as if it were his work. He lay down beside her, took what he believed was his, and Siegfried withdrew, his cloak heavy on his shoulders, his heart racing, his head full of doubt.

Outside in the yard, he washed his hands as if he could rub off the dirt, the betrayal, the feeling of being used. But it wouldn't come off. The cloak of invisibility clung more firmly than he ever wanted to admit.

He knew: He had saved Gunther. But he had sold himself. And he also knew: Brünhild had sensed something. Maybe not seen, but felt it. Her gaze, her anger – that wasn't the end. It was the beginning.

Siegfried drank more that night than ever before. The wine flowed, the cups clinked, the laughter of the courtiers rang out. But he felt none of it. Only the weight of his cloak in the corner, heavy as a stone on his chest.

A trick, they said. A victory. For him, it was just another step into an abyss he couldn't yet see – but could already smell.

The Wedding on the Rhine

The wedding was big. Too big. Worms had never seen such a celebration. For days, slaughtering, cooking, and brewing went on. Sides of beef hung from hooks, barrels rolled through the streets as if the entire Rhine were dissolving into wine. The peasants stood open-mouthed at the sidelines as they watched the rich stuff their bellies until they vomited—and then carried on.

Gunther sat at the head of the long table, Brünhild at his side. She was beautiful, yes, but not like a gentle image. Her beauty was hard, cold, like a sword. Her eyes sparkled, but not with love—with hate. Anyone who looked more closely knew: That was no bridal smile. It was the gaze of a prisoner.

And Siegfried? He was in the thick of it. Not at the head of the table, but not in the shadows either. He ate, he drank, he laughed loudly, and the people watched him as if he were a second king himself. He allowed it. He enjoyed it. The wine flowed freely, and every time he drained the cup, Kriemhild stared at him—with a look that betrayed not only hunger, but also an inkling of what he might be.

The hall erupted. Music, drums, flutes, the yelling of drunks. Dogs snapped at bones, children stole bread, men boasted about scars, women whispered about clothes. It was a riot of voices and smells: sweat, flesh, smoke, wine.

But beneath all the noise, there was tension. Brünhild was silent, but her hands were clenched into fists under the table. She knew something was wrong. She knew the man beside her wasn't the one who had defeated her. But she couldn't prove it. Not yet. And her silence was more dangerous than any sword.

Gernot and Giselper drank, talked, and whispered. One calculating, the other naive. But both had the same look when it fell on Siegfried: respect, yes—but also envy. Envy of his strength, of his reputation, of the way people perked up when he laughed.

And Hagen—silent, watchful, like a dog in the shadows. He barely spoke, but his eyes were glued to Siegfried, watching his every move. He saw the smile, the confidence, the wine in his beard—and he saw the danger.

Siegfried continued drinking. Every sip was a triumph, every scar on his skin a story the crowd wanted to hear. He spoke of dragons, of blood, of battles – and each time, the hall fell silent. He didn't paint fairy tales. He spoke rawly, dirty, full of images of blood and filth. And that was precisely what made him great. The knights listened, the women whispered, the children stared.

That night, Siegfried became the hero of Worms—not just through the legends, but through the way he sat at the table, how he drank, how he laughed, how he occupied the space.

But as he raised his cup and shouted, "To the King!" and the crowd responded, "To Gunther!" he knew: That was a lie. The king wasn't sitting at the head of the table. The king sat in the middle, with wine in his belly and blood in his hands.

And everyone knew it, even if no one said it.

Kriemhild's strange gaze

The hall was still filled with voices, laughter, and belches. But for Siegfried, everything fell silent as soon as he felt her eyes. Kriemhild sat not far from him, her dress like fire, wine in her hand, her lips red—but it wasn't the beauty that struck him. It was the look.

He had seen many women. Whores who smiled at him because he paid. Peasant girls who fled giggling when he flexed his muscles. Widows who sought intimacy faster than the earth sank on their husband's grave. But this was different. Kriemhild didn't look at him like a man she wanted to possess. She looked at him like a man she had to test. As if he were an animal in a cage—and she was deciding whether to open the door.

Her eyes wandered over his scars, over the wine dripping into his beard, over the hands that had seen so much blood. And then they met his. It wasn't a flirt. It wasn't a game. It was a damned blow. Siegfried grinned, drank, licked his mouth. And she smiled back—barely perceptibly, but enough that he felt it down to his bones.

He stood up and walked through the crowd. Men whispered, women fell silent as he passed them. He stopped in front of her, leaning over the table, so close he could smell her breath—sweet, but also sharp, like wine that's been in a barrel too long.

"You are Kriemhild," he murmured, not as a question. She raised her chin. "And you are Siegfried. The one they say slew dragons." He grinned. "They say a lot." "And what do you say?" He took her cup, drank it dry, and put it back. "I say I'm still thirsty."

A murmur went through the table, but she laughed softly. A laugh that only he heard. A laugh that said: *You're a fool. But maybe you're exactly the fool I need.*

Later, as the music raged and the wine overflowed, she stood alone at the window. Siegfried stepped beside her, leaning against the stone. Outside, the Rhine flowed, black, heavy, endless.

"You look out as if you want to be somewhere else," he said. "Perhaps I've already been somewhere else," she replied, without looking at him.

He was silent for a moment, then laughed hoarsely. "Perhaps we should both be somewhere else." She looked at him – and there it was again. That strange

gaze. Not a gentle, dreamy fairytale eye. But cold, probing, demanding. A look that irritated him more than any smile.

She stood close to him, but she didn't touch him. She didn't need to. Her gaze was enough. And Siegfried knew: He wanted her. Not as one wants a woman—but as one wants a sword. An instrument to cut the world apart.

And she knew: He was no knight. No courtly lover. He was an animal. That's precisely why she wanted him.

Between fame and restlessness

Worms lay at his feet. As he walked through the streets, people made way. Children called his name, women glanced at him, men bowed their heads. They said: "There goes Siegfried, the dragon slayer. He who helps kings, he who is invincible."

He sat in the halls, drank the finest wine, ate the best meat, and washed himself in the clearest water. He had everything a man could want in this world. And he hated it.

Because fame is like cheap wine: It pops at first, makes you stagger, makes you laugh—but after the third cup, it just tastes stale. People told the same stories, night after night. "How Siegfried slew the dragon." "How he defeated Brünhild." "How he took the treasure." He heard himself in other people's mouths, pompous, deceitful, made to shine. And he was bored.

He wanted to smell blood. He wanted the impact of a fist, the scream of an opponent, the taste of iron in his mouth. Instead, there was courtly laughter, courtly games, courtly lies.

He drank to counteract it. Every evening, every night. Wine, mead, beer—anything he could chew. He drank until he could no longer hear the courtiers' voices, until the women's laughter grew muffled, until the court blurred. He woke up with a pounding head, a burning stomach, and a heart that still wanted more.

And again and again Kriemhild. Her gaze, her closeness, her words. She gave him warmth, yes. But even she couldn't fill the hole inside him. For he knew:

She was part of this game, part of this court, part of the intrigue. She was fire, but fire alone isn't enough if you want to be a storm.

Sometimes he stood alone at night by the Rhine. The city slept, only the dogs barked, the water gurgled. He stared out, felt the wind, and he knew: This wasn't enough. Never. He had fought, bled, won. But all that was now in the past. The glory was just ashes in his mouth. He needed more. He didn't know what—war, new battles, new dragons, new hells. Anything. Just not this: sitting, drinking, talking, waiting.

He was a man of blood and iron. And blood and iron rust if they stand still for too long.

The courtiers called him a hero. He grinned in their faces, drank their cups dry, kissed their wives – but deep down he knew: heroes die in songs, not in the dirt. And if he had to die, then he would die in the dirt. Screaming, laughing, fighting. Not here, among the lies and noise.

So he lived—a king without a crown, a hero without a goal, a man who had everything and yet was empty. Between fame and restlessness. And he knew: sooner or later, something would happen. Something had to happen. Because men like him don't stay still. Men like him take everything with them. And he did—step by step, cup by cup, night after night.

Celebrations, oaths and suspicions

The festivities in Worms never stopped. Day after day, new barrels were opened, new animals slaughtered, new songs sung. The court was a frenzy of meat, smoke, and wine. Knights boasted scars, half of them fictitious. Women giggled behind their cups, their lips glistening from drinking. Musicians plucked their lutes until their fingers were sore.

And in the middle of it all was Siegfried. He sat at the table, his cup always full, his laughter always loud, his stories always bigger. He told stories of slaying dragons as if it were child's play. He showed his scars, ran his fingers over the cracks in his skin as if they were trophies. The crowd soaked it up. They loved him—or they pretended to.

For the more he spoke, the more whispers were heard. "The stranger takes on too much." "Gunther seems like a shadow beside him." "Kriemhild's eyes... they follow him." Sentences, quiet like knives sharpened behind curtains.

Gunther himself was still smiling, toasting him, calling him "friend." But there was something in his eyes that Siegfried recognized immediately: envy. Envy that the fame, the splendor, the respect wasn't for him, but for the man from Xanten, who was more of a king without a crown than he was with it.

Gernot saw everything. He was too wise to say it openly, but his gaze was cold as stone. He saw the wine flowing, the vows being exchanged, the hands being placed across the tables. And he knew: the bigger the feast, the closer the knife.

Giselher, the youngest, still believed in heroes. He listened to Siegfried, his eyes shining, and believed every word. But even he began to sense that the mood was changing.

And Brünhild—oh, Brünhild was silent. She sat there, her eyes sparkling, her back straight, her lips thin. She didn't smile. Never. Her silence was louder than any song. Everyone knew: She still had a score to settle. And scores are eventually settled.

The vows flew through the hall. "To friendship!" "To our brothers!" "To the kingdom!" Goblets clinked, wine splashed, laughter echoed. But Siegfried heard the wrong note beneath them. Every voice was too loud, every laugh too long, every word too heavy. It wasn't trust, it was theater.

And he loved it. He grinned as he drank, feeling the stares, the daggers, the questions. He knew they hated him, they envied him, they wanted to see him fall. But he was still there, taller, louder, full of wine, full of blood.

"You want me to fall?" he muttered into his mug. "Then come and get him."

He knew: The feasts were just the appetizer. The real meal was yet to come. And it wouldn't end with meat, but with blood.

Hagen von Tronje

If Siegfried was the storm, then Hagen was the stone that simply lies silently in the rain until someone cracks their head against it. The people of Worms knew him. Some said he was already old when Gunther was still a brat. Others said he had seen more men die than a bard could ever cram into his songs. No one knew exactly how old he was, where he came from, or what he had done. But everyone knew: You don't mess with Hagen.

He wasn't a handsome man. His face was coarse, scarred, one eye slightly clouded, his beard uneven. But it wasn't his appearance that frightened—it was his silence. He hardly spoke. And when he did, they were short, harsh sentences that struck like nails. No babble, no laughter, no politeness. Just words that carried weight because they came so rarely.

While the knights boasted, the courtiers giggled, and the women whispered, Hagen sat quietly at the edge. A cup in his hand that he never emptied. A gaze that saw everything. He watched Siegfried drink, laugh, dominate the hall as if he were the king. And there was nothing in his eyes. No admiration, no envy. Only calculation.

Siegfried noticed him. Of course he noticed him. He noticed every glance, every whisper, every murmur. But Hagen—he was different. He sat there, like a shadow, like a knife in the darkness, and Siegfried couldn't read him. So he laughed extra loud, drank extra deep, told the wildest stories, just to see if Hagen would flinch. But he didn't flinch. No smile, no frown. Nothing.

It was as if there was a man sitting there who already knew how it would all end.

The other knights saw Siegfried as a threat. Hagen saw him as a problem. And problems are solved. It was that simple.

Sometimes their paths crossed in the courtyard. A brief glance, a nod. Not a word. They stood before each other like two animals who knew they would fight someday, but not today. Not yet. And every time, Siegfried felt it in his bones: This was his opponent. Not a king, not a brother, not a woman. But this bastard in the shadows.

Legends ascribe him malice, as if he were born to betray. But the truth was more sobering. Hagen wasn't a villain. He was necessary. A man who knew that

a storm like Siegfried's couldn't rage forever. And if the storm didn't subside on its own, someone had to break it.

Hagen waited. And Siegfried laughed.

Two men in a hall, the whole world between them, and yet only a breath away from each other.

Betrayal at the table

The hall was once again packed with people. Meat steamed, wine sloshed, laughter echoed. A feast like any other—but this time there was something in the air that was thicker than the smoke from the torches. It was that damned mistrust. It squatted on every plate, swam in every cup, clung to every glance.

Siegfried sat there, legs wide apart, his boots on the wood, the cup in his fist, his mouth full of meat. He talked loudly, laughed louder, and the crowd listened as always. But this time they weren't staring with gleaming eyes. This time they stared like vultures waiting for someone to fall.

Gunther did what he always did: He smiled, raised his glass, and toasted. "To friendship! To brothers!" And everyone clinked glasses. But no one believed it. The voices were too high, too smooth, too false. A chorus of liars.

Gernot stared silently, his fingers playing with the knife handle. Giseller grinned like a boy who still believes in fairy tales, but even he laughed too loudly, too nervously. And Brünhild? She remained silent. She only watched. Her eyes glittered, as if she were sitting at the slaughter, waiting for the first cut.

Siegfried sensed it. He drank faster, talked more wildly, as if trying to stifle the mistrust with noise. "Do you remember how I killed the dragon?" he shouted, swinging the meat leg in the air. "One blow, and the beast lay in its own blood. It was that easy!" Laughter. Clapping. But under the table—cold feet retreating, hands groping for handles.

Then Hagen. Hagen von Tronje, the bastard in the shadows. He slowly raised his cup, looked at Siegfried with those dead eyes. "A dragon, yes. Impressive. But you only fight dragons once. You fight humans every day." The hall fell silent. The laughter died down.

Siegfried grinned broadly, chewed, swallowed, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Humans? Pah. They fall more easily. Dragons are at least worthy." Some knights laughed, others didn't. Gunther lowered his gaze. But Hagen remained silent, drinking, and this silence was louder than any spell.

The tension crackled like dry wood in a fire. Everyone knew this was no longer a celebration. This was war at the table. Only without swords – yet.

Siegfried drained the cup and threw it over his shoulder, shattering it. "To the brotherhood!" he roared. The crowd responded, "To the brothers!"
But her eyes said: *Soon, one of us will die. And we already know who it will be.*

Hunting in the Forest

The morning was gray as they set out. Mist hung heavy between the trees, drops ran down the bark, the ground was soft, wet, and covered with game tracks. Dogs barked, horns blared, horses snorted. A day for hunting, they said. A day to hunt deer, bear, and wild boar.

But every man on the train knew: the game they were looking for today did not walk on four legs.

Siegfried rode in front, broad-legged, laughing, spear in hand, eyes shining. He was in his element. No halls, no courtly chatter, no stench of intrigue – just forest, just hunting, just breath, just blood. "Finally," he roared, "finally something real again!"

Gunther rode beside him, smiling, but his smile was thin, brittle like glass. He talked a lot, too much. About the size of the animals, about the courage of the hunters, about tradition. Words that vanished like fog. Behind him was Hagen. Silent. Always silent. He didn't speak, he just rode, his eyes always on Siegfried, his spear loose, but firm enough that you knew: The man was ready.

The dogs ran, barking, yanking on their leashes. Deer leaped, wild boars tore through the ground. Arrows flew, spears crashed, blood spurted. A feast for the men, a massacre for the animals.

Siegfried plunged into the midst. He threw his spear, drew his bow, and charged like a madman. A scream here, a blow there, blood on his hands, sweat

on his brow. He laughed, laughed like a madman, while animals died around him. He was in a frenzy. Hunting was fighting, and fighting was living.

But as he laughed, as he shouted, as he chased, glances passed between the men. Gunther nodded almost imperceptibly. Hagen returned it. The chase was only a facade. The real target didn't run away—it rode beside them, laughing, blind.

At midday, they rested by the stream. The water was clear, cool, and sweet. They drank, they laughed, they talked. But the air was heavy, thicker than the morning fog. Siegfried felt nothing. He was too drunk on adrenaline, too full of bloodlust. He laid down his weapons, threw himself into the grass, stretched his arms, and grinned. "This is how it must be," he murmured. "This is how a man must live."

Gunther nodded. Hagen remained silent. And the forest fell silent. Too silent.

The dogs whined. The birds fell silent. The stream bubbled as if trying to hide something.

It was no longer a hunt. It was the beginning of the end.

The stab in the back

The forest was quiet. Too quiet. Siegfried bent over the water, dipped his hands in, and washed the sweat from his face. Cold water, refreshing, almost cleansing. He laughed, roaring across the stream as if challenging the whole world: "Well, where are your dragons now, eh?"

Gunther stood a little farther away, smiling like a man leading another to the slaughterhouse. His cup trembled almost imperceptibly, but he forced himself to appear calm. And Hagen? Hagen was a shadow. Silent, motionless, spear in hand, cold eyes.

Siegfried knelt there, his muscles relaxed, his back bare. A man who trusted too much. A hero who believed he was invincible. And that was precisely his mistake.

"Drink another sip," Gunther said. The words were shaky, but Siegfried didn't hear. He dipped his head into the water, sucked it in greedily, and snorted. A moment. A heartbeat.

Then the blow.

Hagen stepped forward, firmly, quickly, without hesitation. The spear struck, deep, hard, exactly where the linden leaf left the skin exposed. A single thrust, a single cut—and the hero was torn open like an animal.

Siegfried gasped. His scream wasn't a scream, more a growl, a rage, half rage, half disbelief. He turned, his eyes wide, his mouth full of blood. "You... bastard..."

Hagen looked at him, cold as stone. No triumph, no hatred. Only necessity. "You were too big," he murmured. "And too loud."

Siegfried staggered, grabbed for the spear, tried to pull it out, but lacked the strength. He fell to his knees, the water turned red, and the forest echoed the sound of his falling body.

The dogs howled. The birds took flight. And the men were silent.

Gunther stepped closer, saw the dying hero, saw the blood that stained everything. He wanted to say something, a word, a confession—but nothing came out. His tongue was heavy, his heart even heavier.

Siegfried lay there, his hands in the grass, his gaze up at the sky. "A dragon was more honest..." he whispered. Then his head fell to the ground, and the forest fell silent.

The greatest hero did not fall in battle, not before armies, not in fire. He fell like a deceived animal—with a stab in the back.

The linden leaf burns

There he lay. Siegfried, the invincible, the dragon slayer, the hero of whom the songs roared. Blood in the grass, his breath gasping, his eyes half-open. And exactly where the linden leaf had touched him then, the hole now burned, torn open by the spear.

The linden leaf. A damned piece of greenery that had once tumbled out of the sky while he was standing in the Dragon's Blood. A piece of chance. A nothing. And this nothing had been stronger than his entire life. That's how things are: no big blow, no explosion, no finale. Just a leaf, as small as a fingernail, that hadn't protected his skin.

The blood steamed, the pain burned. It was as if this leaf had caught fire, as if it were mocking him. "There, right here," he murmured, placing his hand on the wound. "Here... damn linden leaf..."

His body spasmed, the muscles that had been broken by swords and torn apart by dragons twitched like those of a slaughtered animal. His veins pumped as if they wanted to conquer the world once more, but the hole was too large, the cut too deep, the betrayal too final.

Hagen stood beside him, silent, unmoved. He knew what he had done. He knew he had struck him where the linden leaf had made him vulnerable. He had waited, planned, watched—and stabbed at the right moment. Not heroically. Not honorably. Just practically.

Siegfried suddenly laughed, a throaty, bloody laugh. It was not triumph, not pain, but bitter mockery. "So the great Siegfried dies... not of swords, not of armies... but of a damned leaf." He spat blood, red as wine, and the grass swallowed it greedily.

The laughter was stifled by coughing, the coughing by wheezing. But a residue of fire still burned in his eyes. A residue that said: *I fell, yes. But I didn't break.*

The linden leaf, that little damn thing, had betrayed him. But it wouldn't be the last to burn. Many more would burn. For with his death, a fire was ignited that was greater than himself. A fire that devoured halls, cities, and kingdoms.

The linden leaf burned – and with it the world, which believed that a hero would remain silent forever.

The end of Siegfried

The man who had slain dragons now lay in the dirt like a wounded animal. His body still twitched, his hands clutching the grass as if he could cling to the

world that had long since let him go. His breath rasped, stuttered, drowned out by the gurgling of his own blood.

The drunkard. That's what they called him behind closed doors. A man who always drank too much, laughed too much, lived too loudly. Someone who thought nothing could knock him down as long as he still had a cup in his hand. And now he lay there, his face pale, his lips red, his belly ripped open—and not a drop of wine would help him anymore.

The birds above screamed as if they knew. The dogs whined and retreated, as if afraid that the dead king would drag them down to hell.

Gunther stood beside him, his face chalk-white, his hands sweating. He'd gotten what he wanted—and saw in that moment that he'd gained nothing. Nothing but guilt, which weighed more than any crown. Hagen, on the other hand, just stared. Not a movement, not a word. For him, it was over. One problem solved. So simple, so shabby.

Siegfried tried to pull himself up. He leaned on his elbows, his body heavy as stone. His gaze searched, wandered, and found the sky. "Screw it..." he muttered, blood running down his teeth. "Screw it... I've... drunk enough."

Then he collapsed. The hero, the fighter, the drunkard—dead like any other bastard who had wanted too much. No thunder, no lightning. Only the smell of iron, the taste of dirt, the rustling of the forest.

The men stared, silent. They knew: Not only a man ended here. Here ended a legend, and with it the abyss began.

Siegfried's end wasn't a song. It was a hiccup in history. A man who thought he was bigger than the world—and who was now finished off by a spear and a damn linden leaf.

A drunkard in his blood, nothing more. And that's exactly why no one would forget him.

Kriemhild's Mourning

When they brought him, he was cold. The great Siegfried, who always laughed, who drank, who ruled the halls—now lay still, his skin gray, his lips crusted with

blood. No more screams, no more belches, no more laughter. Just a damned corpse.

Kriemhild knelt beside him, and it was as if the world within her had shattered. Not with a scream, not with a cry. But with a dull thud, like a cup falling to the floor and shattering into a thousand pieces. She touched his face, cold as stone. She ran her fingers over the scars she had loved, over the mouth that was never silent and now remained closed.

She didn't cry. Not yet. Tears would have been too cheap.

"Who did this?" The hall fell silent. Gunther stammered, stepped back. Hagen said nothing. But she knew. She saw it in their faces, in the hands that were too steady, in the eyes that didn't dare meet her gaze.

It was treason. No enemy from outside, no dragon, no army. Treason within his own house. The men who had called him "brothers," who had toasted at feasts, who had shouted oaths—they had killed him like a mangy animal.

Something broke inside her. Not her heart, not romance. But a dam. A dam of restraint, of dignity, of courtly manners. And behind it: rage. A rage so black that it burned brighter than any fire.

She reached for his cup, still smeared with wine and blood. She held it up, her fingers trembling. "I swear," she gasped, "all of you will pay for this. Everyone. With blood. With flames. With screams."

The knights looked away, pretending they hadn't heard. But they all heard. Kriemhild's grief was not the end. It was the beginning.

From then on, her gaze was different. No warm light, no faint smile. Her eyes were glowing coals. And everyone who saw her knew: This woman would not rest. Not for a night, not for a year, not for a lifetime. Siegfried's death was a cut—and she was the sword that would strike back.

And as the hall fell silent, as the dead hero lay in the candlelight, Kriemhild murmured softly, almost like a curse: "Your betrayal is my fire. And I will never extinguish it."

The treasure as a curse

After Siegfried's death, there were only two things holding Kriemhild back: her rage—and the treasure. The Nibelung treasure, this chest full of gold, precious stones, rings, and chains. Stuff that glittered in the candlelight like a cheap promise. Stuff that carried more weight than all the oaths the men had ever shouted.

She had it brought into the city. Chests, wagons, boxes, a train of wealth that clogged the streets. People stared as if a kingdom were rolling in. For Kriemhild, it wasn't jewelry. It was a weapon.

She sat alone at night among the mountains of gold. The court slept, the servants snored, the torches burned down—and she crouched there, her eyes staring at the metal. She stroked the chains as if they were weapons. She ran the rings through her fingers as if they were knives. "With this," she whispered, "I buy revenge. With this, I buy blood."

But the treasure was no friend. Everyone who saw it wanted it. Knights whispered, servants gaped, even kings sent messengers. The gold glittered, and with every gleam, more greedy hands came. And Kriemhild herself felt it. The gold was heavy. It lay on her like a stone, slowly crushing her. It whispered to her, lured her, poisoned her.

Gunther knew. He saw how she guarded the treasure like a dragon, how she became suspicious, how her eyes sparkled whenever someone dared to come too close. He knew: as long as she had this treasure, she wouldn't stop. Not with the grief, not with the hatred.

So he did what weak men do. He took her treasure. He had it secretly taken away, sunk in the Rhine as if it were dirt, as if you could extinguish a woman's fire by throwing a few chests into the water.

But that didn't erase anything. It made it worse.

For a treasure in the water is not a treasure that has disappeared. It is a treasure that waits. That rots, that whispers, that returns as a curse.

And Kriemhild swore: "You can sink it, you bastards. But you will drown in it. Every single one."

Kriemhild's Revenge

Kriemhild wore black, but not like a widow. Not with folded hands and bowed head. No, she wore black like armor. Every seam was hatred, every thread an oath. She was not broken. She was a pile of shards—and shards cut better than any sword.

She lived among enemies. Every breath she took in Worms stank of betrayal. Her husband's murderers drank, laughed, and played kings as if they had done nothing. Gunther with his fake smile. Gernot with his silence. Hagen, the bastard, who didn't even show guilt, only that cold eye that always saw, always waited. She felt it every day: The city was a cage. And in this cage, they wanted to slowly suffocate her.

But Kriemhild didn't suffocate. She collected. She collected anger. She collected memories. She collected every night she saw Siegfried's face in her dreams, bloody, cold, with that damn linden leaf hole in his chest. And at some point, the cage wasn't big enough to hold it all.

Then came Etzel. Etzel, the Hun king, a man they didn't love, a man they feared. His kingdom stank of blood and sweat, his men of horses and iron. But for Kriemhild, that wasn't horror. It was freedom. It was a tool. She didn't take him because he was king. She took him because he had armies. Because he held a world full of warriors in his hands. Because he could give her revenge.

The wedding was a play. Wine, feasting, music, songs. But behind every smile of Kriemhild's lay another line: *This is not love. This is war.* Etzel didn't understand. He saw her beauty, her coldness, her hardness—and he thought he had won a queen. He had no idea that she only held him as a sword.

Years passed. She bore children, she held court, she played the queen. But at night, when the halls fell silent, she sat alone. Before her was a candle, and in the shadow was Siegfried's face. "I do not forget," she whispered. "I do not forgive." And the shadow remained silent, but she heard him laugh. That old, dirty Siegfried laugh. And each time she swore anew: *I'll bring you back. Not alive. But justly.*

Then, one morning, she wrote letters. Beautiful, polite, with the ink of reconciliation. "Come East," she wrote. "Come to my court, celebrate with me, strengthen the bond between us." And she knew they would come. Men are stupid. Brothers are stupider. They believed in their own power, in their

inviolability. And they had no idea that, in truth, they had long since been invited to their own slaughter.

The messengers rode off, and with every hoofbeat, her heart pounded faster. Not from fear. From hunger. A hunger that had been nurtured for years and would now finally be fed.

She stood on the palace steps, watching them, and her head roared like fire. Soon. Soon they'll be sitting in my hall. Soon they'll be drinking my wine. Soon they'll be spitting their blood on my floor.

Kriemhild was no longer a woman. No longer a widow, no longer a queen. She was a blaze of fire. And the world had foolishly decided to put straw around her.

The farm in flames

They came. Gunther, Gernot, Giselher, Hagen—the whole damned gang. They rode in shining armor, with broad smiles, and songs in their luggage. They thought they were coming to a festival. And yes, it was a festival—just one they wouldn't leave.

The halls of Etzel's realm were packed. Barrels were being opened, mountains of meat were being served, music was blaring, women were laughing, children were running around. It was an orgy of wine, sweat, and false peace. The Burgundians drank, laughed, and roared. "Look, we are welcome! Look, the past is forgotten!"

Kriemhild sat upstairs, next to Etzel, and watched. Her face was calm, almost friendly. But her eyes were cold, sharp, glowing like two smoldering coals. She waited. Every minute, every cup of wine, every fake laugh was a drop of oil on the fire.

Then the moment came. A small, seemingly insignificant argument. A word against a word, a shove, a knife suddenly stuck in flesh. And like dry straw, the hall caught fire—not with flames first, but with screams.

The Huns rose, swords drawn, blood spurted. The music fell silent, the children screamed, the women fled. The Burgundians took up arms, still drunk, still laughing—and suddenly found themselves in the midst of a massacre.

Chairs flew, tables crashed, barrels shattered and ran across the floor like red streams. Only it wasn't wine anymore – it was blood. Blades cut through air and flesh, bones cracked, skulls burst.

Hagen stood there like a rock, sword in hand, blood on his hands, on his eyes, on his mouth. He struck, left, right, and the corpses piled up. He fought like a damned demon—but even demons bleed eventually.

Gunther roared, but his voice was drowned out. Gernot fell, pierced by a spear. Giseler stumbled over the corpses, his sword shaking in his hand like a child's toy.

And Kriemhild? She remained seated. Motionless. Only her eyes followed every movement, every twitch, every death.

Then the fire truly spread. Torches fell, curtains burned, wood cracked. Smoke rose, and the heat huddled the combatants together like cattle in a slaughterhouse. The hall, which had begun with songs, became an oven. Every breath tasted of blood and ash.

It was no longer a battle. It was a slaughter. And above it all stood Kriemhild, the queen in a black gown, her face cold, while her enemies died in flames.

The farm was in flames. Thus ended their celebration. Thus began their true story.

Heroes fall like ordinary men

The smoke was oppressive, the fire was consuming, and the hall stank like a cursed slaughterhouse. The men who thought themselves immortal now stumbled like cattle through pools of blood, slipping, falling, screaming.

Gunther, the king who ruled with his false smile, fought like a drunk. His sword clanged, he lashed out, but his movements were heavy, slow, half-blinded by the smoke. No splendor, no throne, just a man who knew the hour had come—and that there was nothing he could do about it.

Gernot, the silent one, fell quickly. No song, no final words. Just an arrow, deep in his throat, a choking, a fall. He wheezed, spat blood, pounded the ground with his fists once more, then he was silent. That was it. Nothing more. A hero, they say. A wheezing sack of flesh, I say.

Giselher, the youngest, staggered like a child. He had always believed in fairy tales, in brotherly love, in honor. But fairy tales die faster than men. One blow, a scream, and the boy slumped, his eyes wide open, as if unable to let go of the dream.

And Hagen? Hagen fought like an animal. He punched, he hacked, he kicked, he bit. Blood was everywhere—his armor, his face, his hands. He stood in a sea of corpses, still holding the blade. But he too knew: It was hopeless. And yet he grinned, that cold grin, as if to say: *Then I'll just die. But I'll take as many with me as possible.*

The hall shook. Wood cracked, flames licked, wine and blood mingled on the floor. Men slipped, fell, and were trampled. Some tried to shout hymns, to shout final prayers – but the words were lost in the smoke, smothered in blood.

That was the end of the "heroes." No halos, no harps. Just men who fell like the rats they had always been—too proud, too loud, too blind to realize in time that they were just flesh on legs.

And above, through the smoke, Kriemhild sat and watched. Her eyes cold, her breathing steady. For her, it wasn't a massacre. It was justice.

The heroes fell. And they fell like ordinary men.

The Last Days of the Burgundians

The hall was a smoking maw. Beams crackled, sparks flew, the stench of blood, burnt flesh, and spilled wine crept into every crack, into every lung. The feast had turned to ash, the heroes to carrion, and yet a few figures still stumbled through the inferno as if they could stop the downfall with their bare hands.

The last Burgundians. A bunch of men who were once called kings, brothers, heroes, but were now nothing more than living wrecks.

Gunther crouched by the wall. His face blackened with soot, his crown gone, his lips chapped. His hands trembled; one finger was broken, hanging crooked and useless. His gaze was empty, glassy, like a king who had realized that his kingdom was nothing more than a pile of ashes. Every now and then he raised his head, as if to give a command. But there was no one to listen to him

anymore. Only smoke, stealing his voice, and the shadows of his fallen brothers.

Beside him lay Gernot, half-charred, his chest ripped open, his eyes staring. No one sang for him, no one held him. He was already forgotten, while his blood still seeped warm into the floorboards.

And Giselher, the youngest, the foolish one who still believed in honor—he lay in the rubble with his neck twisted, his fingers still clenched around a sword that had long since fallen from his hand. His face was that of a boy who had never understood that fairy tales aren't real.

But Hagen still stood. Hagen, the bastard, the shadow, the cold dog. Blood clung to him like a second skin, his sword was nothing but a piece of iron, full of dents and nicks, and yet he swung it as if he could stop death itself. "Come on!" he roared, his voice rough, hoarse, eaten away by smoke and hatred. "Come on, you dogs, I'll take you all!" And indeed, some came. Huns, warriors who wanted to strike him down. But he struck them, he tore them down, he bit, kicked, hacked. Corpses piled up around him, and for a moment he looked like a demon laughing in the middle of hell. But even demons bleed. And eventually, he, too, collapsed to his knees.

Bodies lay everywhere. Piles of flesh and metal, of burned faces, broken bones, muffled screams. Some were still alive, crawling in the dirt, gasping, begging. "Water," they whispered. "Mother." "God." But there was no more water. No mother. No God.

The women screamed, tore out their hair, shouted the names of men who had long been silent. Children wandered around, stumbling over corpses, screaming until their throats were dry. Some were consumed by flames, others by swords.

The last Burgundians—a people who thought they could leave their mark on the world—died like any other scum. In chaos, in stench, in darkness.

And Kriemhild? She stood above it all. Her dress black, her face white from the flames, her eyes like glowing coals. She watched. She wanted to see it. Every twitch, every whimper, every last breath. She had no more tears. She had only this one feeling: satisfaction.

Gunther raised his head, saw her, and in his eyes lay a silent question: *Why?* But Kriemhild didn't answer. She didn't have to. He already knew.

The hall collapsed, beams cracked, sparks rained down. And with the fire, the last remaining survivors vanished. The Burgundians' last days weren't days. They were hours. Minutes. Heartbeats. And in the end—only smoke, blood, and a river of corpses leaving the hall like a macabre celebratory gift to the world.

Thus a people died. Not with trumpets, not with songs. But like any crowd of people who believe they are invincible: in drunkenness, in filth, in their own blood.

The Rhine carries blood and memories

The Rhine flowed as it always did. Thick, sluggish, relentless. It knew no pause, no grief, no heroes. A river makes no distinction between rainwater and blood, between gold and bones. It takes everything, devours everything, carries everything away—and that's precisely what made it the last honest bastard in this whole story.

On this day, the Rhine was no longer a shining mirror in which the sky basked. It was a slaughterhouse. Reddened, heavy with iron, ash, and flesh. Corpses floated in the water like broken branches, their eyes glassy, their mouths open, as if they were about to scream even in death. Some swam on their stomachs, others turned, sank, and resurfaced. Heroes, kings, peasants, children—the river made no distinction.

The banks were black with onlookers who did nothing. Farmers with folded arms, women with children on their hips, traveling merchants shaking their heads. They saw the river full of the dead, they heard the gurgling, the rattling of the current, as if the Rhine itself were groaning under the weight. Some crossed themselves. Others cursed. No one forgot.

And down below, in the depths, where the water was cold and black, it wasn't just bodies that rotted. Promises rotted too. The oaths that were shouted when the cups were still full and the men were still proud rotted. "Brothers for life." "Loyalty until death." All sound, all dirt, all now just bubbles that rose to the surface and burst.

And next to the bones lay the gold. The Nibelung treasure, that cursed weight of chains, rings, and coins. A wealth that didn't glitter, but lurked silently. The Rhine covered him like a shroud, but it didn't hold him back. He knew: humans

are stupid. Sooner or later, they would come, dive, dig. And when they took him, they would also bring the curse back to dry land.

The Rhine drank it all. The blood of the Burgundians, Kriemhild's guilt, the last breath from Siegfried's lungs. It drank it, it absorbed it, but it didn't spit it out. It carried it on, out, through cities, through countries, all the way to the sea. And where it rose, it roared like an old drunkard muttering stories no one wants to hear, but which creep into every throat if you listen long enough.

The fishermen who later cast their nets found more than just fish. They pulled up hands, rings, broken helmets. They saw the water shimmer red in the evening sun and knew: This was no longer a river. This was a grave that was never closed.

They say water washes clean. But the Rhine didn't. It washed nothing. It collected. It collected voices, screams, blood, hatred. Every drop carried the story on, and those who sat on the banks at night swore they heard it: Hagen's roar, Kriemhild's weeping, Siegfried's cursing.

The Rhine carried blood. And it carried memories. It was no judge, no savior. Just a damned river that took everything and forgot nothing.

And as long as it flowed, so did the legend. Not as consolation, but as a curse.

Epilogue: A Legend Without Consolation

Historians like to sit in warm rooms, sharpen their pens, and pretend they can make perfume out of blood. They paint heroic portraits, write of fame and immortality, of crowns and divine destiny. But anyone who has actually been there knows: fame stinks. It stinks of burnt flesh, of spilled wine, of blood that can no longer be washed from the stones.

Siegfried, the dragon slayer, didn't die like a god. He died like a drunk, stabbed in the back for laughing too loudly, for wanting too much. Kriemhild, the queen, the widow, the lover, didn't become a saint. She became a fury, a fire that burned everything down because she could no longer love. Gunther, the king, didn't die a ruler. He died in the dirt, with a blank stare, without a kingdom, without a crown, without anything that made him special. Hagen, the cold dog, the tough bastard, fought like the devil—and yet died like any other man, riddled with swords, a pile of meat in the smoke.

And the treasure? It still lies somewhere down there, in the belly of the Rhine, heavy as guilt. Unredeemed, unforgiven. A piece of gold waiting for the next idiot who thinks he can buy happiness with it.

That's the truth. No consolation. No meaning. Just blood, smoke, and a river that carries all the shit along like an old drunk whispering stories in bars that no one wants to hear anymore.

Some say the heroes live on in songs. But what are songs? Words you shout in a drunken frenzy before you vomit. Words that are cheaper than the wine that fuels them. The heroes aren't alive. They're dead. They lie in the Rhine, in the rubble, in the mouths of ravens.

What remains is a bitter aftertaste. A legend without consolation. A story that redeems nothing, heals nothing, and makes nothing beautiful.

Thus ends the fairy tale of Siegfried and the Burgundians. Not with a ray of light, not with an ascent to the halls of the gods, but like any good drinking orgy: with broken pieces, with vomit, with a damned emptiness that can never be filled.

And if someone sits by the Rhine today, hears the waves, sees the fog—then perhaps they hear the voices. Not because they live on. But because the river doesn't forget. It whispers, rushes, gurgles:

Everything is over. Everything is lost. And no one has gained anything.

A legend without consolation. And that's precisely why it lingers like the hangover after the last bottle.

Epilogue: The narrator turns off the light

So. That's it. You got your heroes, your dragons, your carnage, your kings who died like dogs. You saw a woman burn until everything else burned with her. You heard the Rhine drink it all up like it was just another night in some dive bar.

And now? Now there's nothing left. No heroes, no crowns, no damn happy ending. Just smoke, cold ash, and the taste of iron on the tongue.

I'm sitting here, writing all this down, seeing the images like film tears in a skull that's been drinking too long. I have no consolation for you. No advice either. If you want consolation, go to church. There they sell you lies in their Sunday best. Here, there's only dirt, broken glass, blood, and the realization that everyone falls eventually.

Siegfried? Just a man. Kriemhild? Just a woman. Gunther, Hagen, all those bastards? Nothing more than bones in the Rhine.

And you? You're sitting here, reading this, perhaps waiting for a last shred of hope. Forget it. Hope is cheaper than wine, and the wine has long since been drunk.

So I'll turn out the light now. No punchline, no moral. Just darkness. The story ends here, the way everything ends: quietly, messily, without anyone clapping.

The narrator turns off the light. And you sit in the dark.

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