



ROGUE Angel

Alex
Archer

GRENDEL'S CURSE

The legend of Beowulf
could tear a country apart...

A sword of legend in the hands of an extremist...

Skalunda Barrow, Sweden, has long been rumored to be the final resting place of the legendary Nordic hero Beowulf. And there's something of Beowulf's that charismatic and zealous right-wing politician Karl Thorsen wants very badly. Intent on getting his hands on the mythical sword Nægling, Sweden's golden-boy politico puts together a team to excavate the barrow. A team that American archaeologist Annja Creed manages to finagle her way onto. She wouldn't miss this possible discovery for anything.

With Nægling at his side, Thorsen could be invincible...a Nordic King Arthur. What his followers don't know—and Annja is beginning to suspect—is just how far Thorsen will go to achieve his rabid ambitions. When Thorsen marks Annja for death, she quickly realizes that this is much more than a political game. And the only way to survive is to match Thorsen's sword with her own.

Could it really be Nægling?

Thorssen reached out to touch the fabled blade, closing his eyes to truly experience the feel of the silver sword against his skin.

It felt *alive* to his touch.

“Does Creed know what was found?” Thorssen licked his lips. He knew what he was looking at. He’d grown up with the legend of Beowulf’s broken sword—the great blade that had slain the dragon but broken in two because of the sheer force that the warrior had used to deliver the fatal blow.

“Impossible to say.”

Thorssen liked that about Tostig. He never guessed, he never speculated, he just assessed a situation quickly, calmly, and responded to the information he had at his fingertips.

“Then we assume that she does.” Thorssen picked a shard of debris from the edge of the blade with a carefully manicured fingernail. The corrosion flaked away to reveal the still-shining metal beneath.

It wasn’t as though they could just ask Creed if she knew what had been unearthed. It was a case of damned if they did, damned if they didn’t.

“There is only one way we can be sure she won’t cause trouble,” Tostig said. He never threatened, he simply floated the idea, knowing Thorssen spoke the same language: the language of death.

“Take care of her.”

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ROGUE ANGEL

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Grendel's Curse



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The LEGEND

...THE ENGLISH COMMANDER TOOK
JOAN'S SWORD AND RAISED IT HIGH.

The broadsword, plain and unadorned,
gleamed in the firelight. He put the tip against
the ground and his foot at the center of the blade.

The broadsword shattered, fragments falling
into the mud. The crowd surged forward,
peasant and soldier, and snatched the shards
from the trampled mud. The commander tossed
the hilt deep into the crowd.

Smoke almost obscured Joan, but she continued
praying till the end, until finally the flames climbed
her body and she sagged against the restraints.

Joan of Arc died that fateful day in France,
but her legend and sword are reborn....

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Prologue

Fiery brands had been driven into the earth to create a path of light from the settlement on the hill to the barrow that would serve as his final resting place.

Tonight there was one more legend to dine with the dead heroes in Valhalla.

Tomorrow there would be one less hero to stand against the creatures of the dark.

Every single one of them, every man with his head bowed low, every woman with her tearstained cheeks, every child wondering how the world could still go on without him, would have killed for the honor of carrying his bier down the path of light.

The clan kings led the procession, followed by his thanes and the men of the Wulfings. He had been one of them and yet he had been more than all of them put together. Skin may wrinkle and bones crumble, but the tales wrapped around the old man were an armor death could never pierce. The stories of his life and the great battles that finally brought peace to the land would live on in the hearts and minds of all of them.

And as the day came and the flames from the path of light turned to ash, the winds would scatter his stories across the world and thus his legend would spread. The path of light was a long and winding walk, but those who walked it now would have traveled to the ends of the earth if he needed them there, such was their love for the man.

The sky glowed red in the east, heralding the sunrise.

Now was the time to say goodbye to their king as he began his final journey—his greatest quest of all—from this world to the next.

His mortal remains would be kept safe, held inside the burial chamber they had constructed deep inside the great barrow that had been built to honor him. He would remain there until the end of time watching over them, still clad in his armor, his twin swords that had been so much a part of his life at his side. They would whisper, of course, that he would rise again at the time of their greatest need. There was comfort in such thoughts. The mourners had shifted earth to build the great mound; they had carried stone to form the chamber. A few had even stripped the carcass of the great beast he had slain and who in turn had slain him, and used her scales to line the chamber where his body would lie in wait for Ragnarök. Once it was sealed and the earth spilled down over its entrance, no living soul would set foot inside the barrow again.

The clansmen carrying the bier bearing the old war wolf's body paused on the threshold, the sun rising before them. Birdsong filled the morning. There was happiness in it, as though the creatures of the forest and field had come to praise the dead man. The mourners gathered around the bier, one last chance to say their farewells before his body disappeared inside the earth.

A small boy went inside first, his tiny fist clenched around the brand taken from the path of light. He lit the way for those to follow through the low tunnel as it curved and curved again before opening out into the heart of the barrow.

The air was damp and rich with the smell of earth. The light from his torch flickered in the draft, causing the scaled walls to shimmer and shine with iridescent blues and greens. It was hard to believe such beauty could come from such a dangerous beast, but that was the very nature of the dragon. Even in death it was as beautiful as it was terrible. Her flesh had been consumed at his mourning feast, her bones used to fashion tools and weapons for his thanes; her greatest treasure, though, her scales, were

his and always would be, shining that last glorious light upon the hero who had slain her.

~~The boy could not take his eyes from the old war wolf's corpse as they laid him down.~~

The dead man was dressed in battle-scarred armor. It had been forged, so the legend went, by none other than Wayland Smith. His helmet was placed at his feet, but only when the bearers moved aside were the two blades he had carried in life placed upon his body. There was Hrunting, the thruster, an iron sword with ill-boding patterns wrought into its blade. It had been with him in the mere when he faced the monster and her vile kin. And beside it lay Nægling, the nailer, old and gray but for the jewels studding its hilt. It lay in two pieces now from where it had failed him at the last, broken on the scales of the dragon even as its tip slipped through to end her life.

The last man to enter the barrow carried the dragon's poisonous horn that had delivered the fatal blow. He lay it at the old war wolf's feet while around him the few gathered began to sing the song of mourning.

It was time to seal the barrow.

Beowulf was dead.

Karl Thorssen took to the stage like a god. Not just any god, an angry Norse god of old, with flowing blond locks cascading down his back. The silver hammer of Thor was just visible beneath the V-neck of his shirt.

He was met by thunderous rapture.

The assembly didn't just clap, they stamped their feet, they chanted, they yelled his name over and over and over until it rose into a mindless crescendo. There was something else in the chant, too, words she didn't understand, as the room filled with noise. "Quite some welcome," Annja Creed said to the man beside her.

Thorssen stopped center stage and held his arms aloft.

He closed his eyes, threw his head back and embraced the adoration.

It was more like a rock concert than a political rally, she thought, half expecting to see Queens of the Stone Age or Queensrÿche come striding out behind him. The room had that kind of vibe. Alone, each and every one of the people gathered in the theater might have been the nicest person in the world, but together like this the mob took on its own personality. It gave her the creeps. Annja had seen enough fanatical evangelists whip up this kind of fervor in the faithful to know it wasn't exactly healthy outside of a sports arena, and even then that was more gladiatorial than devotional. The comparison was good, actually. There was something almost religious in this, too. Even his stance mimicked the familiar iconography of Jesus on the cross, suffering for our sins.

Only, Karl Thorssen wasn't suffering in the slightest.

Here, in front of these people, he really was the god they were looking for. That was the only way of describing it.

On either side of the stage Annja marked two thickset men, both in matching dark suits, starched white shirts and pencil-thin black ties. They couldn't have been more conspicuous. They were just another aspect of Thorssen's carefully manufactured persona. SAPO—the Swedish Security Service—had officers in the hall, but they didn't stick out like a sore thumb. Annja had made six of them in the crowd, watching, waiting. This pair waiting in the wings were purely for show. Thorssen wanted people to see them. He wanted people to know there had been threats on his life, but no amount of intimidation would stop him from standing up to be counted. That was the kind of man he was.

She'd only been in town for a couple of days and she already knew that much about him—and it wasn't all down to her inherent distrust of politicians, either. The man was headline news. The tabloids loved him. The broadsheets loved to hate him. The people, she was quickly coming to realize, worshipped him. Even from down in the mosh pit she could feel the magnetic pull of his aura. The man radiated that magical X factor stars needed to really shine. A bit like Roux, really. That old rascal had a certain something. Right now, that something was probably a big pile of chips on the table in front of him, given that the last she'd heard from him he'd muscled into a high rollers' tournament in Stockholm, part of the most popular poker tour. As for Garin, he'd no doubt found some expensive toys to buy, fast cars to race or faster women to chase. She hadn't heard from him in over a month. That usually meant he was up to no good, but then, wasn't he always?

One of the men nearest Annja was close enough for her to make out the edge of a tattoo of Thor's hammer creeping out from beneath his collar. No doubt the room was filled with similar tattoos and

necklaces. The hammer was a common enough branding for fascists in Sweden.

“What does the banner say?” Annja asked the man beside her. Micke Rehnfeldt was an old-school political journalist, the kind of guy not afraid to get his hands dirty if it meant getting to the truth. Thorssen was the current object of his affection. He was producing a television program about Thorssen and his proposed excavation of the Skalunda Barrow down in Årnäs. That was why Annja had made the trip to Gothenburg. How could she not? It wasn’t every day the burial mound of a leger was excavated, and that was exactly what Beowulf was. A legend. The Geatish king who had rid the land of demons and dragons in one of the oldest sagas of its type. So while he wasn’t a monster, he was still the perfect subject for a segment on *Chasing History’s Monsters*.

“*Svensk Tiger Ryter*? It means the ‘Swedish Tiger Roars,’” Micke said. “It’s a play on the old ‘En Svensk Tiger.’ You’ve heard that before, right? It’s like the ‘Loose Lips Sink Ships’ thing the Brits used to say. It’s from an old propaganda poster that warned Swedes to be wary of foreigners during the Second World War.” Annja didn’t see the link so Micke spelled it out for her. “See, tiger is, well, a tiger.” He mimed creeping about like a wild animal, and then grinned sheepishly. “Obviously, but in Swedish the verb *tiga*, which is the root of *tiger*, means to keep silent. So ‘En Svensk Tiger’ could mean either Swedish Tiger or Swede Keeps Silent.”

“Ah, clever. A line deeply rooted in the suspicion of foreigners. Class act.”

Micke nodded. “No kidding. Thorssen’s party is emerging as *the* major force in right-wing politics over here. I don’t know how aware you are of the situation in Europe, but he’s riding a wave of support that is washing across the continent.”

“I’ve heard bits and pieces, it’s hard not to.”

“It’s only natural. When the economy is in trouble and money is tight, people always blame the foreigners for coming in and taking either jobs or putting pressure on state services. It’s the easiest thing to do, blame the outsiders rather than face up to the bad decisions they’ve made along the way.”

“And I’m sure it doesn’t hurt that he looks like Adonis’s only slightly uglier little brother.”

“People will swallow anything a pretty face tells them,” Micke agreed.

Sociopolitical stuff wasn’t Annja’s field of expertise, but they seemed like a reasonable set of assumptions given everything she knew about human behavior.

“Anyway, interesting place for a first date,” she joked, grinning wryly.

“Hey, never let it be said I don’t know how to show a girl a good time,” Micke countered with a grin of his own. It was easy to like him. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the chanting. “Seriously though,” he said, “Thorssen’s interested in Beowulf. He’s one of the driving forces behind the excavation of the mound. I can think of plenty of reasons why, but rather than just tell you, I thought it’d be better for you to see it firsthand—it’s always more impressive that way.”

Even with him half shouting Annja could barely hear him above the clamor of the audience. The front few rows had long since stopped applauding, she realized. While most of the room was filled with supporters and fanatics, the front three rows consisted of journalists representing the world’s press. She recognized a few faces from Prague, Hyderabad and Paris, but could not put a name to any of them.

“Welcome, my friends,” Thorssen began, his words easy, conversational. Annja was relieved to hear he was going to speak in English; her Swedish was limited to saying “thank you” and she’d only learned that a few hours ago. There was more applause. Thorssen gestured for quiet, and within a few seconds the theater was silent.

He had the crowd in the palm of his hand.

“This is the first day. This is a day of new beginnings. This is the day that we claim back our

country. This is the day when the Swedish Tiger roars!” On cue the audience roared its approval.

Thorssen smiled.

Annja didn't like the man's smile; it was condescending and self-satisfied. It was the kind of smirk she felt compelled to wipe off a face.

“For too long now we've allowed ourselves to be invaded by foreigners...foreigners who have been permitted to stay here, to draw from our state and live in comfort without giving anything back. We allowed them to bring with them their own customs, and have tacitly accepted their beliefs. And if we speak up, anything we say is seen as racist, oppressive, against their freedom. I'm all for freedom, and believe me, my friends, I am no racist. I do not differentiate one man from another by the color of his skin or the God he worships. But the plain unassailable fact is these people do not *belong* here. We're a small country. A few years ago we were under ten million, now there are over twelve million people here. We don't have oil like the Norwegians or the British. We cannot support every asylum seeker who comes here. We've been the guilty conscience of the world for too long. Like it or not we have to start thinking about ourselves for once.”

Another round of applause rang out.

Thorssen was preaching to the converted and they were lapping up his sermon.

The huge screen behind him changed to show an aerial view of Skalunda Barrow.

“I am sure some of you recognize this place.” There was a murmur through the hall. Things were about to get interesting. “And even if you don't, you'll know the name. This is the Skalunda Barrow, believed to be the final resting place of our greatest hero, the old war wolf himself, Beowulf.” The screen shifted to show twin swords in place of the burial mound: Hrunting, given to Beowulf by Unferth for the fight with Grendel, and Nægling, the magical blade he claimed from Grendel's cave, having defeated Grendel and Grendel's mother. “He is a true symbol of our heritage. A warrior. A dragon slayer. He killed the enemies who threatened our land...just as the foreigners threaten it now.” Annja couldn't quite believe what she'd just heard. Surely it had to be a language thing? A misinterpretation? But the level of sophistication in the rest of Thorssen's language suggested not. “Now is the time for a new Beowulf to arise! Now is the time for someone to drive the dragons from our land!”

Some of Thorssen's acolytes seemed to be on the verge of losing themselves in rapture. They were rocking back and forth on their heels, murmuring, “Yes. Yes. Yes.” Only the front few rows seemed to be immune to the craziness. Karl Thorssen was none-to-subtly calling for the people to rise up against immigrants and drive them out of the country.

“Surely this has to be against the law? This is nothing short of inciting racial hatred,” Annja said, shaking her head. Her companion didn't hear her. He was engrossed by the reaction of the crowd, and pointing his cameraman to where he should direct his focus.

Thorssen had adopted the pose again, clearly enjoying the adoration.

She noticed one of the securing men sprang into action, making his way down the side of the stage into the crowd. He'd obviously seen something he didn't like. Maybe one of the great unwashed wasn't towing the company line? She scanned the crowd looking for signs of dissent, but everyone seemed to be equally enthralled, waiting for the mothership to beam them up to a racially pure nirvana in the stars.

He pushed his way through the faithful, moving his way toward the back doors.

Curiosity might have killed the cat, but it still hadn't managed to kill Annja Creed, though not for want of trying. She gave Micke a nod indicating where she was going, but his attention was already elsewhere. He was wrapped up in his own work, making sure the whole thing was captured on camera.

for his documentary. There was no denying that it would be good television.

Without another word Annja worked her way through the crowd, until she reached the door, and followed the guard out.

The tattooed man didn't even notice that she was following him.

Once the doors closed behind her Annja should have been isolated from the noise of the auditorium but she wasn't. It was replicated by a large flat-screen television and sophisticated sound system broadcasting what was going on inside the theater.

Halfway down the red carpet, the bodyguard caught up with the man he'd spotted in the crowd. Annja was too far away to hear the exchange, but it was obvious from their body language that it was hostile in the extreme. His fingers dug into the guy's arm as he twisted him around. He said something—the vehemence behind his words translated even if the words didn't. The man didn't back down. Far from it, he pushed himself up into the guard's face and snarled back, feral, spitting full in the middle of his face and cursing him. Annja saw the scar on his cheek. The guard shoved him away and he went stumbling back two steps, reaching out for a handrail to catch his balance before he fell.

The guard grabbed him again.

"Everything all right here?" Annja asked, walking up behind them.

"Keep out of this," the bodyguard growled. Charming soul. "This has got nothing to do with you."

Annja wasn't big on talking with bullyboys, but wasn't about to leave the man to his not-so-tender mercies. "Look, this doesn't have to be nasty."

The man took her intervention as his cue and pulled free of the guard's grasp, running for the door. The guard didn't stop him. He was looking at the screen over Annja's shoulder as the backdrop behind Thorssen changed. The image of the two blades had been replaced by one of a painted Beowulf standing over what was obviously supposed to be Grendel's mother, the hero holding his sword aloft in victory. It wasn't subtle. But nothing about Karl Thorssen was.

The camera shifted focus, settling on Thorssen. The politician raised his arm, echoing the image on the screen. It was a carefully choreographed move. He was fully in control, playing the crowd until a sudden explosion of noise erupted—through the doors, from the sound system, from the walls around her. The entire framework of the theater trembled, and then the stones themselves seemed to cry out as the building twisted and buckled.

The cheers mutated into screams.

Suddenly people charged through the doors, desperate to get out of the auditorium. Smoke and rubble filled the air. Nowhere was safe. Not in there. Not out here in the vestibule. She looked for the scar-faced man—the bomber? Was that what had happened here?—but he was gone, swept up with the tide of people and carried away with the stampede as they surged toward the street. Smoke. Sprinklers. Sirens. Chaos. Annja pressed herself against the wall to let the flood of people past; she couldn't swim against it. Panic drove people from the theater, but not everyone was so lucky. She could see the screen behind the stage with the image of Beowulf battered and bloody in his chain-mail armor, sword aloft, but beneath it, where Grendel's mother had been, there was only rubble and bodies.

"Micke!" she cried. There was no way he could have heard her but that didn't stop her calling out his name. She scanned the faces desperately, looking for her friend, not wanting to look toward the bodies for fear of seeing him there.

And then she saw him giving instruction to his cameraman. He was pointing at the stage where Karl Thorssen lay. That was the money shot. In all this devastation, the man who would be one of those angry Norse gods of old lay battered and bleeding as two plainclothed SAPO operatives climbed onto the stage, trying to find a path through the rubble to get to the politician. It was an iconic moment. It

would be shown on every television set in the world. It would be talked about for weeks. Thorsen rose from the ashes shakily, bruised and bloodied, like the heroic figure on the screen behind him. He breathed in deeply, savoring life amid all of this destruction, and turned to look directly at the camera. *"I am Beowulf,"* he declared.

It was a long night and a longer morning.

She stayed with the rescuers, helping the weak and wounded. Annja pulled at the broken stones, heaving them aside. She heard cries all around her. She couldn't stop. She couldn't allow the horror of the moment to really take root in her mind. Right now people needed her.

Chaos quickly gave way to at least the semblance of order as the paramedics and firemen worked, directing the rescue efforts. To her left three men labored hard, lifting a huge slab of masonry off the legs of a man who wouldn't be walking again for a very long time, if ever. Shock rendered him silent. The rescue workers talked to him constantly, telling him how well he was doing, telling him to hang there, telling him to be strong, that he was almost out, but not once telling him that everything would be all right. There was a reason for that. The woman beside him was beyond help. He clung to her hand. He must have known.

Annja moved on to where she could be of more use.

A medic crouched over a man whose silver hammer on a chain had torn open his throat, giving him a crude tracheotomy.

She recognized Micke's cameraman. He stood aloof from the destruction, taking it all in with his lens as though the camera gave him the right to separate himself from the dead and the dying, to simply watch and record the tragedy rather than be a part of it. She wondered how he could stand there and do *nothing*, but she didn't wonder for very long. He was coping with it the only way he knew how: documenting it. There was no telling what his camera might pick up that they would miss because they were too wrapped up in the immediacy of the moment, unable and unwilling to just take a step back and *look*.

The worst of it, though, was the smell—that slaughterhouse mix of burned meat and fecal matter that came with death.

So she lost herself in the simple act of trying to help.

Annja was among the last to leave the theater, covered in plaster dust and blood. She must have looked like a ghost emerging from the darkness into the bright sunlight. It could just as easily have been midafternoon as dawn; the sky was blue, without a cloud, the air so fresh in her lungs it stung. They were supposed to be breaking ground in Skalunda in a few hours. There'd be no beauty sleep today.

A stone-jawed policeman came across and started talking to her in rapid-fire Swedish. She didn't understand a word and just shrugged. "I'm sorry. American?"

He switched to flawless English. "Before you go, we need your contact details so we can be in touch to take a statement."

"Of course," Annja said. "I'm staying in a hotel downtown." She pointed toward the hulking shape of her hotel towering over the skyline. It was impossible to miss.

"If you could give your details to the officer." He nodded toward an intimidatingly blonde Amazon of a woman with a pistol strapped on her hip and a peaked cap. She was busy taking details from a line of shell-shocked people. Surreally a radio played in the background, a pop song she didn't know taunting the world to come on and do its worst. She couldn't help but think it had.

Annja joined the line to give her contact info, and then wandered the empty streets toward her hotel.

a lost girl in a strange town. She felt her cell phone vibrate in her jeans pocket. When she took it out she saw she had seventeen missed calls, all of them from the same New York number: Doug Morrell, her producer on *Chasing History's Monsters*. Seventeen calls meant he'd obviously seen the news about the explosion at Thorssen's rally and put two and two together. She answered with a not-quite-breezy, "Doug!"

"Annja! I thought you were dead. Answer your damned phone next time, would you? I've been calling and calling. We saw footage of the explosion. Tell me you weren't there."

Doug was a decent guy, if young, blunt and not all that interested in life outside of ratings. She liked him as much as it was possible to like a self-obsessed Ivy League charmer like Doug, which in truth was often just enough to get her to agree to things against her better judgment. He knew it and she knew it. And he liked her just enough in return to at least make the lies and manipulations sound plausible. It wasn't quite a meeting of minds, but in TV terms it was positively synergism.

"Right in the middle of it," she replied, just how lucky she'd been registering as she said it.

"Are you okay? I mean...stupid question...but you know? Two arms, two legs, no bonus bits or bits missing? Every bad word I've ever said, every time I've conned you into doing something you didn't want to do—"

"Don't go saying anything you'll regret, Doug. You know, the kind of stuff that can be used in a court of law." Annja laughed. It was a slightly frazzled laugh. "Because, believe me, I'll certainly hold it against you."

"Okay, good point. You sure you're in one piece?"

"All fingers and all toes in place."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay, I believe you. So, now we've got the mild hysteria out of the way—see what happens when you don't answer your phone?—time for the million-dollar question. Micke had someone in there filming the rally, right?" He paused for a beat, judging her reaction, then added, "Don't get me wrong. It's a tragedy."

"It is."

"But you have to admit it'd make *great* television. An episode on the greatest Norse hero of all, a myth that has continued to fascinate us over the centuries, tied in with the assassination attempt on one of the most charismatic politicians of recent times?" She could hear him marveling at the serendipity that had dropped this in his favorite reporter's lap. "It's pure television gold. I can see it already, can't you?"

Ratings.

It was always about ratings with Doug when it came right down to it.

That wasn't fair, and she knew it. The man who had been terrified when she didn't answer, that had been the real Doug Morrell; the man who wanted the gory details caught on film, that was the TV producer and they were different beasts. It was only now that Doug was sure she was safe that he let that beast out. It was only natural that he did. "Gold," she agreed, halfheartedly.

"Anyway, kiddo, you sound bushed. What is it, one, two in the morning?"

She looked at her watch. It was closer to 5:00 a.m. and she could smell the hit of cinnamon in the air from a nearby bakery. The Swedes loved their cinnamon buns; it was as close as they came to a societal addiction.

"Five."

"You should be in bed. You're breaking ground tomorrow, right? Don't want you looking like

you've gone ten rounds with...well, I was going to try and be clever and name some female boxer, but you get the idea. Beauty sleep. That's an order."

"You ever notice you only tell me what to do when there's an ocean between us, Doug?" Annja laughed. "But just this once I'll be good. I'm too tired to argue."

His voice changed. "I'm glad you're okay, Annja. When you weren't picking up..."

"I know," she finished for him. She couldn't deal with mawkishness at 5:00 a.m., not that she was big fan of it at any other time of day. She walked the rest of the way to the hotel, noting that it was still bright out, and had been for hours. This whole land of the midnight sun thing was a bit unnerving. In the height of the summer it was dark for no more than three hours a night, and if you went far enough north, to the Kebnekaise massif, you could watch the sun approach the horizon, then just rise again without ever disappearing from sight. As it was, the distinct lack of darkness as far south as Gothenburg was enough to turn a light sleeper into an insomniac and have them climbing up the hotel wall.

An early-morning tram drove by on its way to one of the suburbs. The only passenger had her head resting on the window, still half-asleep. Annja waited for it to rumble off down the street before she crossed the road to the hotel.

The night porter smiled at her as she crossed the marbled foyer and made for the bank of elevators and her waiting bed. She saw herself in the mirrored elevator doors. It was a wonder he wasn't reaching for the phone to call for the cops.

* * *

TWO HOURS OF restless sleep later, breakfast skipped, Annja was on-site waiting for Karl Thorssen to grace them with his presence.

There was always something special about that first day on a dig—a sense of anticipation and hope that was almost palpable. Right up until they broke ground, anything was possible.

This was no different.

Beowulf's barrow.

Was the Geatish king interred here?

What, if anything, would they find down there?

Annja grinned despite herself. She wouldn't have traded this part of her life for anything.

Usually the locals were fairly dour and uninterested, but this time it was different. This wasn't just some plot of land where a Roman villa had supposedly stood. This was part of legend. Their legend. Beowulf was more than Gustavus Adolphus, the father of modern warfare; he was their King Arthur. Slayer of dragons.

She couldn't help but think that whatever they found in the barrow had the power to make or break part of the nation's psyche. What if the bones were deformed or stunted? What if they extracted DNA that proved that he wasn't Swedish at all? She thought of Thorssen driven to apoplexy by the imagined discovery his racially pure hero was nothing of the sort, and smiled. There would be a beautiful irony in that.

Annja shielded her eyes against the sun.

The site was already a hive of activity.

Given the attempt on Karl Thorssen's life last night, it was hardly surprising the press had turned out in force to cover the ritual breaking of the ground. There were local dignitaries, too, businesspeople who provided financial muscle to Thorssen's campaign and, giving their teachers the

runaround, a group of schoolchildren who seemed to be everywhere at once, grinning and giggling and pretending to be ancient heroes with invisible swords fighting equally invisible dragons. There were half a dozen television presenters speaking to cameras, each offering a version of the same report. How Thorssen had survived the attempt on his life, how the crowd had gathered for this historic event, how Thorssen was writing his own legend and how the upcoming election promised to be a closely contested thing with a groundswell of support for the right-wing politician in the wake of last night's tragedy.

"Quite a turnout," Johan Cheander said, his camera on his shoulder and scanning the crowd of faces. She couldn't see Micke. Johan was good. He didn't need telling what might make useful footage. Just like the night before, his camera was documenting it all down to the last detail. They'd work out what they needed later.

"You're not wrong," Annja agreed, pointing to the black Mercedes coming across the grass toward them. It wasn't designed for off-road. She'd half expected Karl Thorssen to arrive by helicopter. That seemed like the kind of over-the-top entrance he'd have enjoyed. No doubt he'd discharged himself from the hospital, telling the nurses he couldn't miss this moment for the world. It was the kind of thing that would make good press whether it was true or not.

The sight of the man getting out of the car with one arm in a sling, his rock-star face battered and bruised with any number of minor cuts and abrasions, left him looking like the wounded warrior he wanted to be. The cuts stood out against his pale gray skin. He saw someone he recognized in the crowd and raised a hand in greeting. It took him a second to muster his strength and don the mask of charming affability he'd need to get through the morning, but Annja noticed the occasional wince as he moved, and that he bit on his bottom lip every time the pain threatened to get too much.

Maybe I'm being too hard on him, she thought, watching him press the flesh.

Last night had clearly taken it out of him, but Karl Thorssen wasn't about to be denied the spotlight by something as trivial as an assassination attempt.

That spoke volumes about the man.

Reporters jostled for position as he moved toward the podium that had been set up for the speech, their microphones pushed toward the front. Some were already calling out questions before he reached the lectern. He gave them time to settle down while he gathered himself. He really was good at this kind of thing, playing to the crowd. He wasn't there to address the locals or the schoolchildren. He was talking to everyone on the planet—or as much of it as the news channels would reach. In a viral world that was everywhere there was a screen, a cell phone, a tablet or a laptop. News spread now like it never had before. The reach of microblogging sites was insidious, immense and instantaneous, turning everyone into an on-the-spot reporter. Nothing went unseen. Especially not something like this. Karl Thorssen was a political animal. This was his stage.

He looked up at her and seemed to smile—a smile that was for her and her alone. But of course it wasn't; it was for the cameras.

"Ten bucks says the first words out of his mouth are about politics and have absolutely nothing to do with archaeology."

"I'm not taking that bet," the cameraman said. "Might as well just give you the money."

"Ah, you take all the fun out of life."

"So I've been told."

Annja had heard enough of Thorssen's rhetoric last night. She didn't need to hear any more of it. Instead, she drifted off toward the archaeologists' tents to the side of the dig site. They were more her kind of people. Of course there were plenty of archaeologists out there who didn't think the same of

her thanks to the sensationalist nature of many of the segments on *Chasing History's Monsters*.

"Enjoying the circus?" Annja said, moving over to join a small huddle of archaeologists who were intent on something. The nearest looked up. There was a flicker of recognition, but he said nothing. The joys of syndication. No doubt the show was on some obscure cable channel over here.

"Just waiting for the clowns to turn up," his friend said.

"Don't worry, they're here." Annja grinned.

"Thought I heard the natives getting restless."

"Thorssen's just gearing up to do his thing."

"Good," the quiet one said. "The sooner he's done, the sooner we can get on with our job."

"Just consider yourself lucky you're getting to do this at all. We've been trying to get permission to crack open the barrow for years, but have been blocked at every turn. I don't know how Thorssen pulled it off, but the guy's got friends in high places."

"Or some very incriminating photos, more like," the quiet one said, this time with a wicked grin. He stood up and brushed off his hands on his jeans. "You know how it is with the rich and famous—they operate in a different world to the rest of us mere mortals. Lars," he said, holding out his hand to Annja.

"Annja," she said, taking it. She felt the distinctive calluses of someone used to working the dirt.

"Ah, Ms. Creed. I thought I recognized you."

"Occupational hazard."

"Word came down from on high that you'd be doing a feature on the dig."

"On high meaning Thorssen?"

"On high meaning our benefactor, yes. I've been told you've got the run of the place," he said. He didn't sound happy about it, either.

"It's not every day we break open the tomb of a legendary king. It'd be great to get some footage of you guys at work."

"And in return he gets more publicity for his controversial cause. I guess we know who you sold your soul to, Ms. Creed."

Annja took the jibe in the spirit it was intended. She wasn't about to defend her producer's deeply ingrained commercialism, but he was right—assuming the segment was edited together in his favor, they were providing Thorssen with yet another mouthpiece to spread his message. Luckily for everyone, Annja got to do the final edits on her segments. "There's nothing in my contract that says I gets a second of airtime," she said. "I'm not here for the politics—after all, the show's not called *Chasing Modern Politicians*, is it? Our viewers don't care about immigration or racial segregation unless we're talking about soldiers from the Holy Roman Empire. Give me a good old-fashioned monster hunt any day of the week. I leave the politicking to serious journalists."

Lars seemed to like that answer.

She tried to remember his surname. She had it written on a card in her pocket, but could hardly take it out and check.

Lars...

Lars...

Mortensen.

That was it: Lars Mortensen.

"So, what's your deal with Thorssen? He just letting you in on the action out of the kindness of his heart?" she asked.

"Hardly." Lars grunted. "He wants first look at everything we uncover, and any broadcast or press

release has to have his name slapped right across it.”

“It’s all about the glory for him,” one of Lars’s companions explained, joining them. “The more press he gets, the more he gets to play the benevolent champion of Middle Sweden, the more people will lap up his stupid politics and buy into his send-them-back-home promises. Makes me sick just thinking about it.”

He was right; Thorssen’s rhetoric was the sort that resonated with certain segments of society whenever there were open borders and high unemployment; the flow of people toward a better life was always one-sided, and with any one-sided narrative it was easy to spin it negatively.

“Well, how about we get one over on him by having you give me a call before anything comes out of the ground, then technically you’re not breaking your promise to Thorssen. Saves him getting his hands dirty, too.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s quite happy to get his hands dirty,” Lars said, though the kind of dirt he meant had nothing to do with the rich soil of the dig site.

Annja glanced across at Karl Thorssen, who was on the podium now, hands braced on either side of the lectern as he leaned forward. His hair fell across his face. He didn’t brush it aside for the longest time, then made a show of biting back the pain when he did. It was quite the theatrical performance. He spoke slowly, enunciating each syllable so no one would miss a word.

“Today is a landmark day for this proud nation of ours. Today is a day we embrace the past. Today as we drive the shovel into the ground to turn the earth, we are forging a connection with the land of our forefathers. Think about it. As we open the barrow we are digging through the same ground they strode upon. The same earth. We are tapping into the magic still latent within that soil. Heroes walked upon this land, the greatest of which lies buried beneath it. The past and the present are separated by a few feet of dirt. Think about it.” His voice carried across the quiet crowd. They were obviously doing what they were told. There was an intensity to his voice that demanded it.

Listening to him, she realized Karl Thorssen was a believer; every word that came out of his mouth was what he meant. Yes, it was theater, but weirdly that didn’t make it any less *real*.

Believers were always the most dangerous men in her experience. It didn’t matter who did the actual dirty work, just so long as it got done. She’d already seen that Thorssen had an army dedicated to his cause.

“Ah, my minute in the sun,” Lars said, picking up a pristine shovel that had been leaning against a couple of crates of equipment. “Time to put on a smile for the cameras.”

Annja studied his face as Thorssen drove the shovel into the yielding dirt, rested his foot upon it, then pushed down. Not once did he wince or show any sign of physical discomfort. Putting on a brave show for the world? she wondered. Or letting the mask slip to show who you really are?

It was impossible to know one way or the other.

Thorssen turned over the soil to cheers and applause from the small crowd. The cameras had their sound bite and their visual leader for their news segments; his job here was done. He bowed his head, raised a hand in thank you and farewell and allowed himself to be helped back to his car.

A short while later he was driven away, and people were left milling around asking what, if anything, would happen next. It didn’t take long for the children to grow restless, several of them deciding that rolling like logs down the hill was a good idea. Their teachers had trouble corralling them, but eventually they were herded onto the waiting coach and whisked away.

The reporters, who only a few moments before had been pressing their microphones forward trying to catch every word Thorssen said, had their backs to the barrow and were doing their final pieces to camera, telling their viewers what they’d just seen and why it was so significant. Fifteen minutes later

it was a ghost town. The TV crews had packed away their equipment and driven off in a convoy. Now that Thorssen was gone the barrow was back to being a grassy hill. They'd return if and when evidence was unearthed that Skalunda Barrow truly was the last resting place of Beowulf. Until then, story filed, they'd forget all about it as soon as the next piece of news broke.

"How about I make myself useful?" Annja asked as Lars and his team started to unpack rolls of plastic sheeting from their van. He doled out instructions to others, surprisingly in English rather than his native Swedish, which led her to think that it was for her benefit. He had everything under control but Annja never was one for being a spectator.

"It's fine, we've got it covered. Unless you fancy a shift with the shovel?"

Annja laughed, assuming it was a joke. Dig sites used mechanical diggers these days to scrape the surface back and mark out the trenches for excavation, not teams of slave labor with shovels. She looked around for the digger, but there was no sign of one anywhere.

"So when is the digger arriving?"

"Digger? You're looking at him."

"Are you serious?"

"Sadly. Yes."

"What? Why?"

"Red tape. We could only get approval to excavate if *everything* was done by hand—minimal impact on the environment, every single sod replaced as close to its current position as is humanly possible."

"Wow. Better grab a shovel, then. We're going to be at this for a while."

"Tell me about it," Lars said. "It'll take us a day to clear out what a backhoe could do in half an hour. But in this as in the rest of life beggars can't be choosers. Lucky for you I've enlisted half of the horticultural department from the university to do the grunt work. Let the big strong farm boys do the backbreaking stuff."

"Nothing wrong with a little extra muscle." She held out her hand. "Pass the shovel."

Lars handed her the shiny new shovel Thorssen had used to break the ground.

"Where do you want me?"

"Over there, we've marked out a trench where, according to geophys results, we believe the entrance to the barrow lies. Have fun."

Annja hefted the shovel onto her shoulder, but before she walked off to lose herself in some good old-fashioned manual labor, she asked, "Do you really believe he's down there?"

"It's been a long time, and there's no way of knowing for sure, but yes. I wouldn't be getting involved in this unless I thought that there was the realistic chance of finding something."

"That's not the same as saying you think we'll turn up Beowulf's bones. We're talking fourteen hundred years for grave robbers, looters, despoilers, defilers, never mind treasure hunters, and heaven knows what else to come along and plunder the barrow."

"That's always a risk," the archaeologist agreed. "We won't know until we're inside. Just as we won't know if this is the tomb of Böðvar Bjarki—the Norse warrior king from the *Saga of Hrólfr Kraki*, for instance, whose story mirrors the legend of Beowulf in many significant areas. We know it was from Geatland that Böðvar arrived in Denmark, and moreover, that upon his arrival at the court there, he killed a monstrous beast that had been terrorizing the court at Yule for two years, not unlike Grendel. Of course, there's no evidence as to whether Beowulf was real or not, but his character from the poem does fit seamlessly into the context of his society and Germanic family tree."

"Seamlessly? It doesn't exactly fit the poem, does it?"

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