

“On Display”

Beowulf, King Arthur, and President Theodore Roosevelt walk into a room.

It’s a fifties styled dining room, with everything set in the kitchen. The whole set is a pastel turquoise color, from the cabinets to the rounded refrigerator to the floral decals in the wallpaper. Arthur huffs, pulling out the chair at the head of the table and shoving his cape away as he sits. Theodore chuckles and tips his hat to the door on the other side of the room. Through it, is the room’s accompanying living room piece. A hyper realistic, tubby mannequin is posed sleeping in a recliner chair. The TV in front of him plays nothing but static. Theodore pauses before sitting, hand perched on the chair across from Arthur.

“Now Arthur, you ought to take a minute and pay your respects to our most generous host,” he says with a serious look, then bows exaggeratedly to the mannequin on the other side. The snide smile under his synthetic mustache is just enough to earn a heavy, regal sigh from Arthur. The king rolls his eyes, crossing his legs and arms as he pouts like a disgruntled teen.

“Can’t we go one night without your inane jests?”

Theodore gives a roaring laugh, hearty and practiced. Beowulf pays close attention to the way his chest moves up and down with the sound, as though the death-metal contraption underneath the wax flesh is actually looking for air. The process is convincing, more than the museum needs it to be, really. It’s not like the visitors ever get this close to Theodore (or any of them, for that matter) to notice his breathing. Then again, being the largest home to wax animatronics across America called for an unparalleled authenticity according to the brochures.

Arthur's cold, marble-blue stare falls onto Beowulf. "And what's your problem?"

"Nothing," Beowulf murmurs, finally stepping away from the doorframe and walking towards the fridge. The situation is entirely claustrophobic in Beowulf's mind. Who wants to eat where they cook? It's just sad. Modern things are just sad.

He pulls open the refrigerator door. The light buzzes on, revealing an assortment of fake glass dishes and resin-filled jugs. Most of the trays are glued down to the white racks, but after a decade of the trio's nightly dinners, most of the adhesive has been chipped off. Beowulf pulls out three dishes—The peas, the rotisserie chicken and the tuna casserole. None of it is food he would have tried, in his previous life or the next, but Theodore has always insisted that *this* is as close to classic American cuisine as they'll get.

He sets the food down on the table, then he grabs the plates and glasses from the cabinet and sets those too. He places the painted-plastic-silverware on both sides of Theodore and Arthur. Theodore thanks him. Arthur does not. He's in quite the mood tonight, and Beowulf isn't exactly cheery about things either. He eyes the red zip tie pinching Theodore's wrist, the tail end jutting out from under his sleeve. Sensing his stare, Theodore clears his throat and pulls his sleeve over it once more.

"A toast," he announces then, producing a tin flask from his breast pocket and raising it high. Arthur and Beowulf follow suit. "To us."

"To us."

"To us."

They don't bother pretending to drink this time. A couple years ago, they might have. Beowulf's eyes fall on the empty fourth seat, the one across from him. They would have done a lot of things a couple years ago, he thinks.

"I had a little girl come up to me today," Arthur says, twirling the fork in his hand. "She had one of those foam swords from the gift shop, the Excalibur ones. The brat wouldn't stop looking at mine. Crying about how small hers was."

"You didn't cause a scene, did you?" Beowulf grimaces into his food. Arthur rolls his eyes, kicking one leg over the other under the table.

"*Obviously* not. But her bitch of a mother said *my* sword wasn't that big to begin with, smirked at my *crotch* and then walked away. The brat just looked smug after."

"Children are a gift, aren't they?" Theodore chuckles. "I adore them."

"Suppose that's why you had so many," Arthur tries to dig the fork into the peas, the click of plastic against plastic just as unsubtly bitter as his tone. Beowulf swats him away from the dish, receiving yet another indignant look from the king.

"Four sons and two daughters... Can you believe it? What an incredible life that must have been. Why, we wouldn't even have enough room here for so many little ones!" Theodore exclaims.

"We'd make room," Beowulf replies. Theodore grins, toothy and proud. Arthur looks as though he's swallowed his own knife, but he doesn't say anything. Beowulf rests his elbows on the turquoise tablecloth. "I bet you were an amazing father."

“I don’t know about all that. Must’ve been hard to find a balance, as a leader and whatnot. But, I would have had the energy for it all. I most certainly would have.”

“Real men shouldn’t have children,” Arthur says. “We’re not built for fatherhood.”

“You’re only saying that because of your father,” Theodore points out. “Not every child comes into the world like that, you know. Mine was—”

“—It has nothing to do with King Uther. He was a fine enough man, and I was illegitimate. He gave me more than he ever needed to,” Arthur interrupts with a regal, raised right hand. He curls his fingers into his palm, pressing it against his mouth as he swallows before finishing. “I was not built for fatherhood, and that’s why I died.”

There’s a long pause that follows. Then, Beowulf raises his eyes, first to Theodore, then to Arthur, and with a sly smirk he says, “And here I thought the magic incest baby killed you.”

“Oh, you—!” Arthur reaches over and slaps him in the head. Beowulf laughs, moving out of the way and evading any other attacks. Theodore howls with laughter, clutching at his chest to steady himself.

“I adore you two,” he says. “I think these nights are what I’ll miss most.”

They all fall silent after that. Arthur reaches over for the pea dish and begins picking at it again. Beowulf doesn’t stop him, instead eyeing the rotisserie chicken with a similar desire to disassemble it. Anything to keep the conversation off of where it’s going. Eventually, Theodore clears his throat.

“So. They’re taking me to the Melting Pot tomorrow.”

The “Melting Pot” is what they call Baba Yaga’s pot. It sits in her display, front and center and tilted towards the viewer so that they can peer into the evil witch’s brew. The mannequin hangs above it, face molded into a sinister, open-mouthed cackle. It is an unsettling display, but what makes it all worse is the glob of wax-flesh brewing inside the witch’s cauldron. Keeping to cheap realism, whenever the museum doesn’t need an animatronic anymore, the innards are discarded, and the wax bits melted down and poured into the display. Those chosen for melting are marked with the tell-tale zip tie, a vibrant death warning worn on the right hand.

Last time Beowulf saw the installation, he could still see one of Achille’s green eyes leering up at him from the pool of flesh. He hasn’t visited it since.

“History Hall isn’t doing as well as it used to.” Theodore smiles as he speaks, but the sorrow in his tone seeps through his teeth. “It sounds like they’re looking to replace us all one by one. I suppose I just drew the short end of the stick this time around.”

Arthur throws his fork down violently, crossing his arms. “Those bastards... You’ve been a model denizen here for *thirty years*, and now they just throw you away? Despicable...”

“It is what it is, Arthur. We were built to be looked at, and well... No one wants to look at this old thing anymore,” Theodore sighs. Beowulf digs his fingers into the tablecloth, unsure of where to put his hands.

“I’m sorry, Theodore,” Beowulf mumbles. “I wish we could do something more for you.”

Arthur stands from his chair, shaking the table as he wraps his hands around the edges and leans over it. “Why don’t you *run*? You know your fate, yet it’s as though you’re—”

“Resigned to it,” Theodore finishes with a polite nod. The brim of his hat hides his eyes as he looks down to his plate and says, “I am, Arthur. There’s no point in escaping.”

Beowulf watches as Arthur’s nose wrinkles in frustration, eyes narrowing as he glowers down at Theodore. “I never took you for a coward, Roosevelt.”

“Watch your tone,” Theodore replies sternly, his neck snapping up to meet Arthur’s gaze. “Any further in that direction, and you’ll be disrespecting the dead.”

A tense silence falls over the table after that. If Beowulf could cry, he would. As Arthur begins to storm out the room, Theodore calls after him.

“Please,” he says, standing from his seat with a hand outstretched. Arthur just stares at him from the doorway, cold and bitter. “You can leave after, but... Please. Hear my final request.”

Arthur does not return to his seat, but he doesn’t leave either. Theodore turns to Beowulf then, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“I need you two not to watch me as I go,” he says firmly. Arthur just rolls his eyes and scoffs, crossing his arms as he leans against the doorway.

“But—” Beowulf begins, but Theodore raises a hand, and he closes his mouth again. Theodore shakes his head, and with two solid pats on Beowulf’s shoulder, he lets go.

“I won’t have my dearest friends turned into sextons. It’s just not right. Not after all we’ve already been put through.”

Later, Beowulf returns to the Hall of Myth alone. Arthur says something about stretching his legs, but they both know he’s off to dismantle some innocent display. When they first met,

Arthur tore the Lancelot mannequin apart piece by piece every night. The bloodthirsty king would scream as he'd do it, snapping the fabled arms Lancelot used to hold Guinevere, bending his torso until it cracked at the spine. Fortunately for Lancelot, he never came to life to feel Arthur's wrath.

No one was sure why some of the mannequins were alive and why some weren't. There was no pattern to the unspoken magic that chose them. Robin Hood wasn't, for example, but the nameless barbarian planted under Ghengis Khan's foot was, and could usually be found shooting his arrows at the bathroom mirrors on the second floor. George Washington wasn't, but Marie Curie and Leonardo Da Vinci often played poker in his plywood boat. Hercules wasn't, but Harriet Tubman was, and she was always trying to smoke something with Jesus Christ. They asked Beowulf to join once, but he declined. It wasn't like they could feel the affects of smoking anyways, and that was always more of an Achilles endeavor.

Thinking of Achilles was bad luck. Once he started, Beowulf found that he couldn't stop. He saw Achilles in everything. His golden curls haunted him in the polished floorboards. His voice echoed in the darkest corners of each display. And even though the Foreign Fairy Tales exhibit was on the other side of the building, he could always feel that lone, green eyeball's stare on the back of his neck.

Achilles himself hadn't been sentenced to the melting pot like Theodore—It was more the result of a terrible accident. When he had been posed out in the lobby, a teenage boy with a poor sense of humor crawled under the velvet rope and grabbed Achilles by the ankle. The mannequin toppled over violently, and though any of the newer models would have been fine from the fall, Achilles was not. His chest cracked against the marble floors, and as the teenage boy pulled away with an expression of horror, he took Achilles' leg with him.

Beowulf didn't even get the chance to say goodbye. The museum staff carted Achilles off right then and there, a chariot of the Greek hero's limbs destined for the Melting Pot. Then, a week later, they returned with New Achilles.

New Achilles sits on a fallen, foam pillar in his display, legs swinging idly. With a perfect, Greek-chisled sigh, he calls out to Beowulf from behind.

"Lovely night, is it not, Beowulf?" Beowulf says nothing and continues walking ahead. His own display is at the end of this hall, across from Arthur's and just after Gilgamesh. New Achilles jumps off the pillar and follows. "I was just talking to Cicero, and he said the guards have not visited us all night."

"They don't tend to this floor after nine. Everyone knows that," Beowulf replies shortly. He hopes his tone is enough to get New Achilles to leave, but it never is.

"Right, well. I thought that perhaps you would like to join me for a stroll. Through the Religious Wonders, perhaps. I hear the new Buddha they put up is something to behold. What do you say?"

Beowulf pauses for just a moment. He turns to look at New Achilles, *really* look at him. Everything about him truly does ring close to the Achilles he remembers. The tanned skin, the marble white toga and the gold-strapped sandals, even the way his mouth quirks closer up on the right when he smiles, it's all so close. But then he meets New Achilles' eyes, his perfect, ocean blue eyes, the beautiful gaze of a complete and total stranger, and the despondent grief takes over again.

“I’m tired,” Beowulf says. “I’m going back to my case.”

“Oh.” The footsteps behind him stop. The frown on Beowulf’s face feels strained as he refuses to turn. He hears New Achilles take a deep breath, before finally he says, “Tomorrow night then! Goodnight, Beowulf.”

Beowulf doesn’t say it back. It’s not a good night, and he doesn’t owe New Achilles anything. In fact, the night New Achilles arrived, Theodore, Arthur and Beowulf made a pact not to interact with him at all.

“Achilles wouldn’t have wanted us to confuse him for a ghost,” Arthur said.

“It’d be disrespectful to the man we knew,” Theodore agreed.

And Beowulf kept his mouth shut on the matter, still staring at their empty fourth chair.

Beowulf ducks under the velvet rope, pushing past the revolving glass case and stepping into his display. It’s a rocky, dark cavern, with the maul of the green, evil dragon sticking out towards him from the top. The scales are individually painted along the snout. He runs his fingers over it before picking up his sword and locking his feet into position. Here, he grasps the sword with both hands, blade pointing towards the vulnerable neck of the beast. Here, he remains.

The biggest mystery of the museum (barring the living mannequins) was the one that Beowulf thought the most about—Jeanne d’Arc. Despite the legendary bravery she was molded after, this version of Jeanne d’Arc was meek and frail. Her hair hung in close blond waves that

curled around her ears and framed her round face. Her bangs were too short to hide her bright green eyes, typically glued to the ground when she spoke to anyone.

Once, Beowulf passed her in the Religious Wonders section. She was staring up at the museum's rarest and most controversial item—A painting of Muhammad, a full-body portrait surrounded by Islamic scripture. Beowulf didn't know much about religion, but something in the way her eyes followed the white-veiled body of the prophet made him doubt what little he did know. He didn't say anything to her then. He and Achilles had made plans to raid Noah's Ark and rearrange the limbs on the zebras that night. So he left her there, and he carried on with the rest of the evening as planned. And in the morning, when the museum had opened, Jeanne was gone.

The next night, the four gathered to discuss her disappearance.

"Melted," Arthur said.

"She was popular! They wouldn't have just thrown her away out of the blue," Theodore replied, wagging the painted fork to punctuate his point. Arthur scoffed, smacking Beowulf in the arm.

"Please, she barely had more visitors than this one. Popular is an exaggeration."

"Oh, incorrigible King Arthur as always," Theodore sighed. He tilted his head as he turned to Achilles. "Penny for your thoughts, sir?"

Achilles had his face cupped with both hands, leaning over the table. His golden waves always seemed to glow under the bright fluorescent light of the dining room, framing his sharp

jawline. The silver circlet atop his head shimmered as he tilted his head. His bright green eyes rolled up to the ceiling as he thought.

Then finally, he said, “Perhaps she just left.”

Arthur scoffed, earning a truly nasty look from Theodore as he motioned for Achilles to continue. Achilles cracked a grin at the exchange before speaking again.

“According to the placards, Jeanne d’Arc never took a sabbatical of her own. Her faith was only expressed through the war around her. Perhaps our Jeanne wanted to honor her namesake and use her freedom.”

“A rather intriguing notion indeed Achilles,” Theodore nodded thoughtfully. Even Arthur’s face softened at the explanation, setting his fork down.

“She *was* a soldier,” he said quietly. “I suppose even she wanted a fighting chance outside.”

“What’s your theory, Beowulf?” Achilles asked, nudging him with his elbow.

Beowulf thought for a long moment. It was hard, with Achilles staring at him so expectantly, and with Arthur impatiently tapping his foot all the while. Then finally, Beowulf mumbled, “What does it matter? She’s gone either way.”

Despite his words that night, she never quite left Beowulf’s mind. He often pictured her pushing past the glass doors, under the cover of night, bare wax feet against the black pavement. She’d walk through the empty parking lot, chin raised to the horizon line as the moon watched over her from above. She’d break past that final line of trees, stepping over the strip of dirt and onto the road, and further onto whatever lay after that.

After Achilles, Beowulf found that whenever he imagined Jeanne, Achilles would be waiting for her just on the other side, with a hand outstretched and a lopsided grin. It was the closest thing he had to a dream, really.

A good crowd of people rush in through the doors behind him in the morning. He can only see them from the corner of his eye as they move through the corridor of frozen caricatures, guided by the velvet ropes down the hall.

“Look, Mommy!! It’s a real knight!” a child cries out, running right up to the edge of Arthur’s exhibit. Beowulf forces down a smile as the kid grabs the rope and tugs it, causing the golden stands on either side to wobble. The mother of the child hushes him and pulls him away, only after admiring her reflection in the glass wall.

In his exhibit, Arthur is posed at the head of his table, holding Excalibur high above him as the rest of the table (sans Lancelot, of course) watches in reverence. Tapestries hang from behind, orchestrating the incredible tale of a peasant crowned king through brightly colored thread. But the real Arthur (or rather the fake one Beowulf *actually* knows) is an awful, rambunctious bastard. If people knew how violent he was once the museum doors were closed, ticket sales would surely plummet.

Arthur and Beowulf were only friends for two reasons—The first was obviously time. They had come to life a couple days apart, and just being across the hall meant always seeing one another. It only made sense that they be on good terms. The second was the Melting Pot. When they took Lancelot away and melted him down, prying open his mouth for added decoration, they took Guinevere with him. Maybe they were worried Arthur would turn his

attention to her next, or maybe it was to punish Arthur for giving them such a hard time in the first place. Either way, Beowulf found Arthur dry heaving on the floor, reaching for the cauldron.

“It’s her *hair*,” he said, his cape all splayed around him as he stared wildly ahead. The red velvet looked like blood in the dim light radiating off the display. It made Arthur look small, like some wounded prey spilling its innards onto the forest floor. Beowulf looked to the display, grimacing at the long, copper-red braid that now hung from the flesh inside and draped over the edge of the cauldron. He knelt down, wrapping an arm around Arthur carefully.

“It could be anyone’s, Arthur. It’s just part of the installation,” Beowulf whispered, drawing Arthur closer into his side. Arthur shook, clawing at the floor with his hands.

“I would recognize a strand of her hair in a filthy sea of a thousand wildebeests, Beowulf. I know it’s hers.” And he sobbed then, without tears, without air, just for the sake of expressing grief. The irony of her head being buried so close to Lancelot’s traitorous, parted lips was not lost on either of them.

Theodore remained uncharacteristically stoic on the matter, giving Arthur a wide breadth of distance for weeks after the incident.

“I won’t be of any help to him now,” Theodore had told Beowulf, as they watched Arthur tear Abraham Lincoln to pieces. Tatters of the inanimate mannequin’s well pressed suit were scattered around the display as Arthur pried the mannequin’s head off with an animalistic growl. Theodore’s face darkened as the head rolled towards them, hitting the glass window that separated them from the scene. Achilles didn’t even flinch at the sight.

“He’s mourning, Theodore. He could use your wisdom,” Beowulf pleaded. “I can’t manage him on my own.”

“You can’t manage him at all,” Achilles said. As Beowulf scowled over his shoulder, he was met with a deeply serious look from Achilles. His eyes followed Arthur’s form blankly as he added, “Trust me. All you can do is watch him tear himself apart, Beowulf. In the end, that’s all any of us can do.”

Though it was painful to do, Beowulf did just as Achilles said. He watched Arthur turn into a grieving tyrant, and a year later, when Achilles joined the Melting Pot, Arthur returned the favor for Beowulf.

They wheel Theodore out just before closing. It’s some sort of tradition, posing the figure on the cart and running them through the Hall of Myth. “A hero’s sendoff” is what they advertise in the brochures, but Theodore believed that it was always a message to the living mannequins. A reminder of what happens to those who don’t do as they’re told. Now, Theodore was being carted off just the same. Beowulf tried to keep his eyes on the dragon’s, the over-sized amber spheres glaring back at him. Perhaps if the dragon were more menacing, it wouldn’t be so easy to feel his heart pounding steadily with every press of the wheels into the linoleum floor. From the corner of his eye, he could see the security guards pass. He wondered if Arthur could see it too. He had to have a perfect view of the whole affair from where he was sitting. Was he watching, against Theodore’s wishes? Or were his eyes raised with Excalibur? He wants to look. He wants to look. He wants to—

The doors close behind the cart. Theodore is gone.

That night, Arthur doesn't show up for dinner. Beowulf waits under the buzzing lights in the fifties kitchen. He hasn't set the table—It's Theodore's turn for that, and they have to talk about who's going to pick up the slack. He can't remember who it was after Achilles. Maybe it was Arthur. Maybe it was Beowulf. But someone did, and someone has to now.

The clock next to the fridge ticks loud. It's become more noticeable over the past few months, the hour hand clacking against the minute hand in a way that makes it sound broken. Or maybe it's not broken at all, and this is always how the clock has sounded. The room just used to be too loud to notice.

There was a conversation he had with Achilles here once. Beowulf closes his eyes as he recalls it. Arthur and Theodore had retired for the night, but the moon was still too low for Beowulf's liking. So there he remained, sitting at the empty table with Achilles just across from him. They had set the lights low, opting for the single spotlight hanging over the dining room set. Achilles had leaned over the table, as he so often did, with his lips pursed thoughtfully and his eyelashes downcast against his delicately painted cheeks. They flicked upwards suddenly, as he looked at Beowulf, and spoke.

“Do you think we were *real*?”

Beowulf must have made a terrible face at that because Achilles frowned back at him and furrowed his eyebrows. “You know. In the life before this one.”

“I don’t know,” Beowulf replied dumbly. Everything he said around Achilles alone back then *sounded* dumb, like his throat was stuffed full of bear fur and feathers. “You should ask Theodore. He would have a better answer for you.”

“He wouldn’t understand though! There’s nothing speculative or mystical about Theodore Roosevelt. He has a real history behind him,” Achilles groaned, arching his back as he slumped forward. With his mouth curved down in a half-pout, he looked up at Beowulf, chin placed atop his forearms. “He’s not like *us*.”

And the way Achilles said that word, *us*, sparked something primal in the hollow of Beowulf’s chest. Slowly, without thinking, Beowulf reached for Achilles, pulling his hands into his own. He pretended to feel the roughness there, the places where the wax had been scratched and worn down, the matching indentations across their palms from when they had ventured to the end of History Hall and swung from the lights above the Hanging Garden of Babylon. He stared down at Achilles’ golden knuckles, running his own pale white thumbs over them as he began to speak.

“I don’t know,” he repeated, and just as Achilles drew in a sharp, artificial breath, Beowulf whispered “But I hope not. A life where I never met you wouldn’t have been worth much at all.”

Achilles was quiet. Then, in a lowered voice, “Surely you don’t really think that, Beowulf. Your tale—True, or not—was so *grand* it echoed centuries later. You were a champion of the people, slayer of Grendel. You were a hero.”

“So were you. But I’ve yet to hear you say you miss Troy.”

“I don’t remember Troy.”

“And I don’t remember the dragon. I don’t remember the people I fought for, the ones I’m told I loved enough to die for,” Beowulf turned his face up towards Achilles, looking him earnestly in the eyes. “But I’ve *known* you, Achilles. I want to have always known you.”

Beowulf opens his eyes. He sits still for another five minutes, something in him aching to finish the reverie, but another part of him knowing he doesn’t want to remember Achilles like that. There was nothing gentle about his death. Achilles was boiled, melted down and replaced, and it’s easy to forget all of that that when Beowulf can only recall the world before. He watches the clock with weary eyes, tapping his foot impatiently.

After another ten minutes, he finally gets up to leave. Arthur must be off on another destructive crusade, he thinks. It’s likely that Baby Jesus will be found decapitated in his manger in the morning, and even though Beowulf is not religious, he knows he probably shouldn’t let that happen.

So, he wanders. He moves through the Row of Ages, moving backwards through time with it. The Chevy Bel Air fades into the front of a train car, which devolves and becomes the covered wagon and the naked stillness of the wild horse.

He stops for a moment by the Woolly Mammoth on his way. It’s a grand part of the hall, life-size according to the podium next to it and covered in a beautiful coat of brown synthetic fur. He reaches out and runs a steady hand against the smooth, white tusks reaching out for him. Years ago, after Achilles and on a night Arthur was deviously indisposed, Theodore and Beowulf spent their night with this creature.

“Of all the animals in the museum, *this* is the one I want to see come alive the most,” Theodore told Beowulf. He held his model rifle proud in his hands as he said that, looking up into the glassy eyes of the mammoth.

“Why?” Beowulf asked.

“The real Teddy Roosevelt never got to hunt one. I feel like I owe it to him.”

Beowulf followed his dignified gaze up, looking at the creature’s massive build for himself. “How would you even kill it? None of our weapons are real.”

Theodore clicked his tongue, and raised the rifle up. He aimed the end of it towards the center of the mammoth’s chest.

“I would turn the safety off, just like this, then pull the trigger and shout, ‘BANG!’”

Beowulf jumped at the sound of his voice bouncing off every surface in the hall, echoing out into both exits. Theodore blew imaginary smoke off the barrel and shot Beowulf a wide grin. “And then the mammoth would drop dead, knowing what that word means.”

“Bang?”

“Bang.”

The Hall of Ages ends at a crossroads, an atrium shared by the three final branches of the museum: History Hall, Foreign Fairy Tales, and Religious Wonders. Beowulf steps forward, pivoting right as he moves towards the religious section to stop a terribly blasphemous event, when his eyes catch a figure lurking in entrance to Foreign Fairy Tales.

Caught under the light of Baba Yaga's lamps is New Achilles. Ethereal in the night, he's eyeing the cauldron, fingers restless at his side.

"What are you doing here?" Beowulf asks.

"I came to grieve," New Achilles says, not looking at Beowulf for a second.

"You didn't know Theodore."

New Achilles chuckles at that. "Not him. I was sad to hear he passed, though. You're welcome to come closer, they haven't added him in yet."

"Who, then?"

New Achilles reaches out, drumming his fingers along the rim of the cauldron. There's something stiff about the movement, something almost fearful about how close he is to the contents. The way his mouth tightens as he stares into it is not lost on Beowulf.

"Myself, I suppose," he says softly.

Beowulf clenches his fists, fingers digging into the wax fat of his palms. He wants to say something vicious here. *You didn't know him either*, he wants to say. *You have no one to grieve. You have nothing, you are nothing, nothing at all.*

"No one else seems to visit here. It's a graveyard. A foul one, to be sure, but the dead ought to be honored, not forgotten." New Achilles points his chin up towards Baba Yaga. "I thought you of all people would understand that, Beowulf."

Beowulf feels his stomach churn. His feet remain planted where they are, ten feet out from the entrance to the exhibit. He can just barely make out Baba Yaga's crooked nose, her whole body hanging precariously from the ceiling. New Achilles turns to him, finally. He smiles,

soft and delicate, too delicate for the warrior the legend says he was. Then again, all Greek heroes seem to be built that way—Too fragile for their own good.

“...I’m sorry,” Beowulf says. It comes out more pathetically than he’d like, fists clenched at his side. He casts his face downward, as if that will help his case.

“For what? Ignoring me? Wishing me dead?”

“I never wished you were dead.”

“You certainly treat me like it,” New Achilles snorts. It’s an ugly sound, but it’s the closest sound he’s ever made to Achilles. Beowulf’s Achilles. He continues, ignoring Beowulf’s surprise. “You look at me as though I am stewing in this pot when I stand right in front of you, better than before.”

“I liked you before.”

“I know. You never fail to remind me.”

“I don’t mean to. I’m sorry,” Beowulf swallows, failing to keep the words down. New Achilles bores into him, approaching him with a look of curious anticipation. “It’s just hard—”

“—What about this is hard for *you*? Do you know how many people would kill for this second chance? I come back to you, and you do nothing but scorn me for it!”

“Don’t act like this is easy for me!” Beowulf snaps. “I lost you, and I grieved, and now—
Now all you do is haunt me.”

“I’m *alive*! What about that don’t you understand?” He’s close now, so close Beowulf can feel him. New Achilles leans in and whispers, “Stand by me again.”

“I can’t,” Beowulf isn’t sure what makes him shake as New Achilles takes his hands. Maybe it’s something in his joints, a fault in the build of his wrists that causes them to tremble as New Achilles closes the distance and forces Beowulf to look him in the eyes. Even without the light to truly see them, Beowulf knows they must be green, the same green they’ve always been.

New Achilles tilts his head, lips quirking up. In the dark, he presses his fingers into Beowulf’s palms, and steps further into him. “Throw me away, then.”

“What?”

“Throw me away. Kill me, if you must. Tear me limb from limb, leave me in a pile only the gods will recognize. Ruin me, Beowulf. Because if you truly cannot love me again, this second life was for naught.”

Beowulf bows his head then. Between the shaking and the inordinate breathing, his body feels beyond control. He doesn’t remember what kissing was like when he was alive, or if he was ever really alive at all. Beowulf, hero of legend, a tale passed through word of mouth until someone was smart enough to write it down may have never kissed at all. But as he presses his mouth firmly against New Achilles’, he can’t help but wonder how he knows that it is meant to be warm. He pushes further, kissing again and again, waiting for that feeling to emerge from between their lips. New Achilles moves his hands around Beowulf’s neck. Beowulf holds him steady at the waist, eyes shut tight.

Then, something clatters behind him. Beowulf jolts, pulling away to look over his shoulder. Arthur stands there, fresh from the Religious Wonders exhibit with Excalibur in one hand and an ominous burlap sack in the other. He squints, less accusingly and more confused.

“Beowulf? Is that you?”

Beowulf grimaces. “It’s me, Arthur.”

“Is there someone with you?”

Beowulf looks back to New Achilles, then steps backward. New Achilles stares, mouth agape in question. Beowulf doesn’t know what he’s asking, or why New Achilles just stands there as Beowulf turns to Arthur and reveals them both. Arthur’s glove tightens around the hilt of his sword as he takes in the sight. His eyes dart from Beowulf to New Achilles, eyes wild and frantic.

“What are you doing with—*We agreed*,” Arthur stumbles over his words, his tone stuck somewhere between confused, bitter and hurt. “We agreed not to tarnish Achilles, and here you are on the night of Theodore’s death—”

“Arthur,” Beowulf says, raising his hands and stepping towards him. “Please, just listen...”

“*No*,” Arthur growls, sheathing Excalibur and clenching his fists as he meets Beowulf halfway across the atrium. He grabs Beowulf by the wolf pelt sitting on his shoulders, his gloved hands shaking violently. “We made a promise. How could you have forgotten that? How could you have forgotten Achilles?”

“He didn’t—” New Achilles offers from behind, trying to pull Beowulf away from Arthur, but Arthur shoves Beowulf aside and jabs his finger into New Achilles’ chest.

“Don’t you *ever* speak to me, you worthless specter,” he growls. “I will dismember you here and now—”

“Arthur!” Beowulf shouts, setting his arm firmly against Arthur’s breastplate as he comes to stand between them. Arthur gawks at him, his nose turned up as he glares at Beowulf. “*Stop*. Please. We were just... Talking.”

New Achilles jolts a bit at that. Once again, he looks to Beowulf with his mouth open ever so slightly, a reminder of how much more they did than talk. Beowulf looks back and shakes his head slowly.

“I think you should go now,” Beowulf says. Arthur’s never hurt an animate mannequin before, but there’s a first time for everything, he thinks. New Achilles hesitantly nods, head drooping as he leaves through the atrium exit. Arthur’s eyes follow him all the while. Once he’s gone, he snaps his attention back to Beowulf.

“I don’t even know where to begin with you,” he huffs. “What would Theodore say?”

“What does it matter, Arthur? He’s dead,” Beowulf argues back. He steps away from Arthur, staring back at Baba Yaga’s display. “And I’m tired of thinking of the dead.”

“Then why were you with *him*?” Arthur asks. His tone is less furious now, more desperate to understand. More concerned. Beowulf doesn’t answer, instead walking towards Baba Yaga. His feet move for him mindlessly. Arthur follows from behind, and eventually, the two are in front of the cauldron once more.

Guinevere’s braid still hangs outside the rim of the cauldron, more frayed from the constant spotlight. Lancelot’s mouth remains sculpted nearby, and Achilles’ single, green eye peers up at him from the pile expectantly.

“If you could have her again, would you?” Beowulf asks. “If you could have her like I have him, would you take this second chance?”

Arthur is silent for a long time. The whirring of the lights above them is all that fills the space, as Beowulf stares into the cauldron’s amalgamation of flesh. Then finally, Arthur speaks.

“I couldn’t take losing her again, Beowulf,” and as he wraps an arm around Beowulf’s shoulders, he whispers, “We aren’t built to suffer the same loss twice.”