

9

The chapter opens in December, depicted as a bleak time; the atmosphere is heavy with death and decay as the trees are lifeless, the ground frozen, and the deer emaciated. The protagonist reflects on the desolation around them, finding elements of death, such as dead wolves half-buried in snow. Despite the starkness of winter, there's a sense of an impending change, something strange yet reminiscent of spring. As they traverse the quiet town, they encounter children playing in the snow, leaving eerie impressions like winged creatures that provoke contemplation and curiosity.

The scene shifts to Hrothgar's Bowman, who embodies the stillness of a predator hunting a hart amid the haunting woods. In a tense moment of confrontation, time seems suspended as the hunter and prey face each other, before the hunter's swift action leads to the hart's demise. This image sticks with the protagonist, hinting at an underlying enigma.

Near Hrothgar's hall, grotesque idols of the Scyldings' gods stand with hollow expressions, as the priests perform misguided rituals, such as a blood sacrifice of a calf, in hopes of invoking divine protection against perceived threats. Their ineffectuality and lack of belief lead to the protagonist's cynical observations about religion, further underscored by their own past actions of vandalizing these idols that did not elicit significant concern from the populace except for the priests.

As the night deepens, the protagonist muses within the ring of gods while observing the somber figures around Hrothgar, Wealtheow, and others, all silently enduring their troubles. The arrival of Ork, a frail old priest, disturbs the silence. His encounter with the protagonist develops into a darkly humorous dialogue that explores the nature of divinity. Ork's profound yet rambling musings about the King of the Gods evoke a blend of mockery and solemnity, culminating in a dramatic moment of emotional revelation from Ork, which captures the attention of other priests.

The conversation escalates, highlighting the tensions within the priesthood, as some are drawn to Ork's experiences while others dismiss them. Overall, the chapter intertwines themes of decay, the inefficacy of rituals, and existential musings on divinity, as the protagonist observes the impotent faith of the priests amid the surrounding desolation.