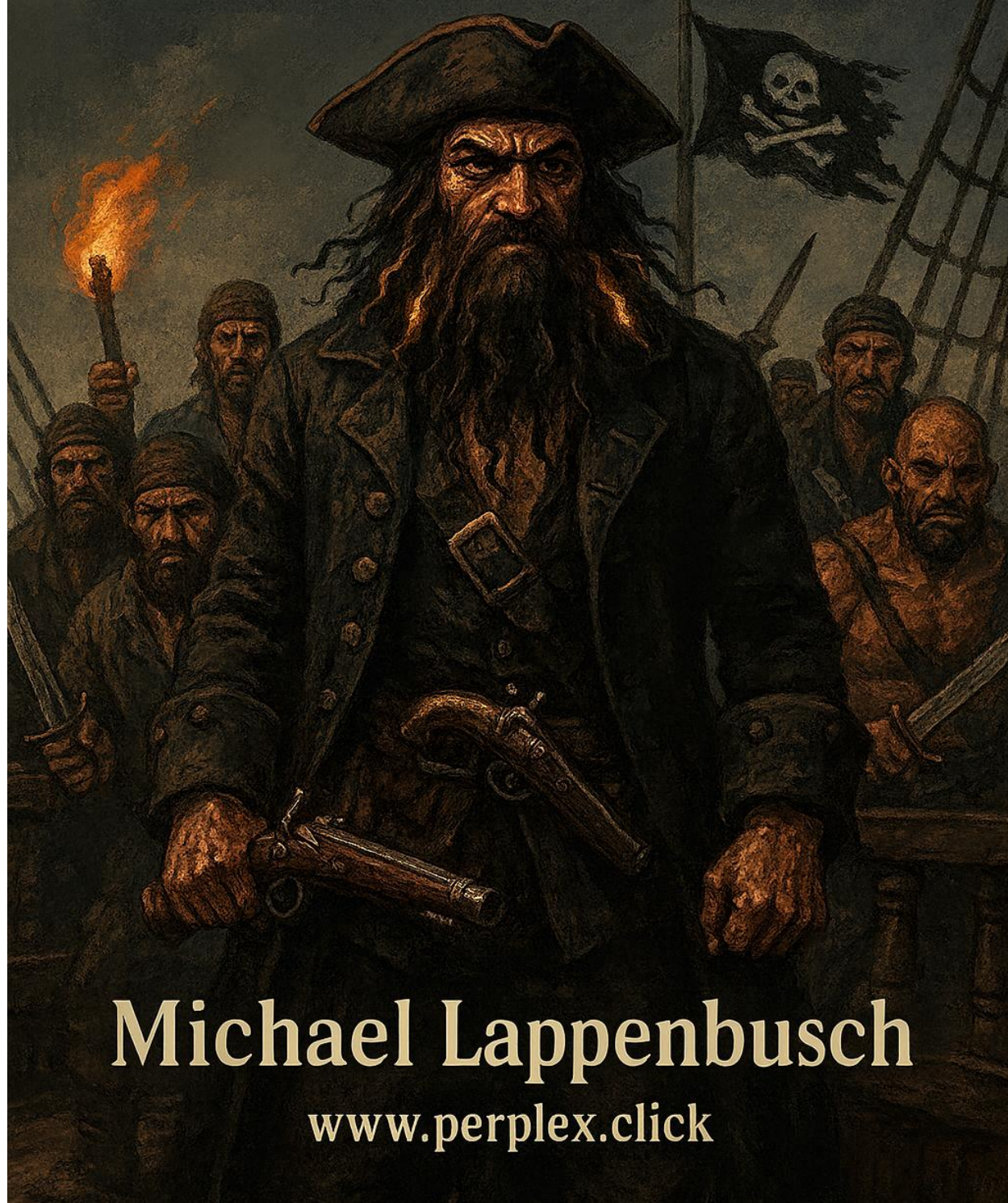


BLACKBEARD

MY FLAG WAS A CURSE



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I wasn't born, I was spat out.

I don't remember the moment I was born. I only remember that the world didn't want me. It spat me out like a bad swig of rum—too warm, too cheap, too honest. I lay somewhere amidst dirt and sweat, and someone was screaming, probably my mother, or maybe just the wind, already practicing pissing in my face. Birth is a nice word for people with clean hands. For me, it was a kick out.

I came from a woman who looked at me as if a sick animal had been placed on her chest. No smile. No pride. Just weariness. Deep, ancient weariness, the kind women have who have seen too much and received too little. Her gaze told me everything I needed to know for the rest of my life: You're a mistake. Make something of it or go under. I did both.

The man who could have been my father had long since disappeared, or was dead, or drunk enough not to remember that he had fathered me. Men like him leave no names, only stains. And stains can be washed away. Children cannot. So I remained. Unwanted. Unassigned. A piece of flesh with lungs.

I grew up amidst splinters of wood, salty air, and curses. Houses were dilapidated, people even more so. Everyone had lost something before they even knew it was theirs. Teeth. Hope. Decency. I learned early on that the world isn't fair, just loud. If you shout, you might get a sip. If you're silent, you get nothing. So I learned to shout, first internally, later outwardly.

Hunger was my first teacher. He was patient, merciless, and always there. He sat on my chest at night and whispered in my ear that morality is worthless when your stomach is empty. I believed him. I still believe him today. Anyone who claims otherwise has never truly been hungry or is lying like a priest on a Sunday.

The adults talked about God when they didn't know what else to do. God was their last cheap trick. I never saw him. If he was there, he hid himself well. Maybe he was afraid of us. Maybe he was right. In any case, I learned how to steal faster than how to pray. Prayer doesn't fill your stomach. Stealing sometimes does.

My childhood smelled of mold, urine, and old fish. The harbor was my playground, my classroom, my church. Ships came and went, and I learned early on that everything that moves can also disappear. Scarred men told stories that tasted of lies but were better than the truth. I listened. I remembered every word. Stories are weapons. Whoever masters them masters fear.

I saw men die before I knew how to live properly. One simply collapsed, mouth open, eyes blank. No one held his hand. No one said a word. Death was nothing special. It was part of the landscape, like seagulls or dirt. I learned not to look away. Looking away makes you weak. Those who are weak get eaten.

Being hit was normal. It was as much a part of life as rain. Sometimes it came from strangers, sometimes from those who claimed to mean well. I learned to see my body as something to be used, not cared for. Pain became a kind of language. Clear. Direct. Honest. It doesn't lie.

I had no name that meant anything. Names are a luxury. I was simply there. A boy with wide eyes and too many thoughts. The thoughts were the most dangerous thing. They made me

uneasy. They whispered to me that there was more out there than this hole of wood and misery. That the sea not only stinks, but also calls out. I heard it at night. That dark, deep rumble. It sounded more honest than any promise anyone had ever made me.

I saw a real ship for the first time when I was old enough to understand I didn't want to die there. Black hull, tall masts, sails like bleached bones. Men on deck, tough, loud, alive. They looked as if they'd spat in the world's face and won. In that moment, I knew I wanted to belong. Not to them, perhaps, but to what they represented. Movement. Escape. Possibility.

People said the sea takes more than it gives. I laughed. The land had given me nothing at all. So what did I have to lose? I was already lost. And lost things are no longer afraid.

I wasn't born. I was spat out. And everything that gets spat out has two options: rot or bite. I chose to bite. Early on. Much too early. But the world had begun.

I learned early on that tenderness is for people with time. We didn't have time. We had days that felt like debt and nights that reeked of fear. If someone touched you, it wasn't to hold you, but to check if you were still functioning. I was functioning. Most of the time. If not, I quickly relearned how.

The harbor was a damned stomach. It swallowed everything that fell in and eventually vomited it up, altered. Men came ashore with eyes full of hope and left with backs covered in scars. Some didn't leave at all. They stayed in the water, down where it's still. I watched them and thought that maybe silence wasn't such a bad thing after all. But I wasn't ready for it yet.

I worked before I knew what work meant. Carrying, hauling, wiping, running. Always running. If you were slow, you got nothing. If you were too fast, you got in trouble. You learned the right pace with bruises. I had a lot. They were like badges, only more honest.

The adults rarely laughed. When they did, it sounded broken, as if something inside them was breaking, something that wasn't whole to begin with. They drank to forget, and forgot in order to keep drinking. I watched them closely. They were my textbooks. Bad books, but the only ones I had.

There were days when I just wanted to get away. Away from the voices, away from the stench, away from the feeling that my life was already decided before it had even properly begun. But leaving takes courage, and courage is expensive when you have nothing. So I stayed and accumulated anger. Anger is cheaper. And it keeps you warm.

I learned to read people before they even opened their mouths. Shoulders, gait, hands. Hands betray everything. Shaky hands lie. Steady hands kill. I remembered that. It was useful. It saved my ass more than once later on.

Sometimes I saw children who had it better. Clean shirts. Full faces. Parents calling their names as if they were precious. I didn't envy them. Envy eats you up. I looked down on them a little. They didn't know what the world was really like. They would be surprised. Surprises are deadly.

I started taking things. Small things at first. A piece of bread. A piece of cloth. Later, more. I didn't feel guilty. Guilt is for people who have options. I didn't. So I took what I could get, and if someone caught me, I ran or fought back. Both worked pretty well.

Once, an old bastard hit me with a stick. He hit me hard, again and again, shouting something about order and decency. I spat blood at his feet and laughed. Not because it was funny, but because I'd realized that his order would never be mine. He kept hitting me, but he'd already lost. He just didn't know it yet.

At night I lay awake listening to the sea. It told me stories without words. Of freedom that hurts. Of men who belong to themselves, at least for a while. I imagined what it would be like to be on board, the wind in my face, the earth alive beneath my feet. No standing still. No going back. Only forward or under.

I started training my body, without calling it that. Climbing, running, fighting. I wanted to be strong, not pretty. Pretty people die faster. Strong doesn't mean invincible. Strong just means you can last longer. That was enough for me.

There were moments when I thought of the woman who gave birth to me. Not often. She was like a shadow in my mind. No hatred. No love. Just a fact. She had thrown me into this world, and I had decided not to quietly disappear again. That was all.

I witnessed real violence for the first time when two men slit each other's throats for no reason. No grand drama. No heroics. Just blood, warm and dark, on dirty planks. The crowd watched, some cheering, some turning away. I stood there feeling nothing. That frightened me. Then I realized that fear, too, is just a feeling that can be used.

The older I got, the clearer it became that I didn't want to belong. Not here, and not anywhere else where rules are made by those in power. I wanted to be my own mistake. My own curse. My own damned problem.

The sea waited. Patiently. Like an animal that knows you'll come eventually, no matter how much you resist. I sensed my life would begin out there, not here. This was just the preparation. Hell before the fire.

I was spat out, yes. But I was still there. And I grew tougher. With each day, each blow, each hungry night. The world had tried to break me. Instead, it had made me grow teeth.

At some point, I stopped hoping. Hope is like a bad tooth: it hurts as long as it's there. So I ripped it out. After that, things were easier. I expected nothing more from the world, and that's precisely why it couldn't disappoint me anymore. Disappointment is just another form of pride. And pride is dangerous when you have nothing to lean it on.

I learned that everyone has a price. Some know it, some don't. Those who don't know it are the cheapest. They sell themselves for a smile, a word, a promise. I resolved to keep my price high, even though I didn't yet know what it was. Maybe it was freedom. Maybe it was simply the ability to say no and not die in the process.

The city smelled the same every morning: of stale water, cold ash, and the breath of those too tired to die. I walked through those alleys as if through a slaughterhouse. Everything was prepared, everything was waiting. You could choose whether to wield the knife or lie beneath it. I had decided early. Decisions are important. They at least give you the illusion of control.

I listened to men who thought they knew everything. They talked of work, of duty, of a better tomorrow. I saw their hands and knew they were lying. Hands never lie. They were chapped,

trembling slightly, clinging to things they couldn't save. I remained silent. Silence is powerful. It makes others nervous. Nervous people make mistakes.

There were days when I was on the verge of simply walking into the water and never resurfacing. Not out of sadness. Out of curiosity. I wanted to know what it felt like to no longer have any obligations. But something held me back. Perhaps it was defiance. Perhaps it was the feeling that I still owed something to the world. Or the world to me.

I started observing myself as if I were someone else. A boy with too much hunger and too little fear. I liked what I saw. Not because it was good, but because it was real. Real is rare. Real survives.

An old sailor took me to the quay one evening. He smelled of rum and stories no one wanted to hear anymore. He showed me a knife and said it would either save your life or take it. It depended on how you used it. I nodded. I understood more than he thought. Knives are honest. They don't ask about your background.

He told me about storms that turn men into animals, and about nights when the sea screams like a woman who cannot be calmed. I listened and knew he wasn't lying. Some truths you recognize immediately. They feel like a punch to the gut.

I started imagining what my life might be like if I didn't stay here. Not in concrete terms. No dreams of wealth or fame. Just movement. Away from this damn stagnation. Stagnation is death by degrees. I wanted everything at once or nothing at all.

The first few times I saw blood flowing because of me, I slept badly. Later I slept better. The body adapts. So does the soul, if you let it. I let it. I didn't need it to be soft. Soft souls sink. Hard ones float, even if they don't know where.

I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid of living a life that felt like a bad joke without a punchline. I saw enough men doing just that. They woke up, worked, drank, slept, and waited. For what, no one knew. Maybe for the end. That was too slow for me.

There were nights when I sat alone by the water and talked to myself. Not out of madness. Out of clarity. I told myself that I owed no one anything. That I would take what I needed. That I wouldn't ask for permission. These conversations calmed me. Calm is dangerous, but also useful.

I realized I was different. Not better. Different. I didn't fit into their idea of a tidy life. Order is a cage with a pretty paint job. I wanted to taste the rust, not admire the color.

The sea grew louder in my head. It wasn't calling my name; I didn't have one yet. It was calling me. That was enough. I knew that eventually I would answer. That I would go aboard, no matter what. As a corpse or as a man. Either way was fine with me, as long as I didn't stay there.

I was spat out, yes. But I didn't stay down. I picked myself up, piece by piece, from the dirt, the anger, and that damned urge not to be broken. The world hadn't given me anything. So I was going to take it. With both hands. And if it hated me for it, so much the better.

Hate is also a form of attention. And attention means you exist. I existed. Damn it.

Salt in the mouth, dirt in the heart

Salt was the first thing I truly knew. Not love, not school, not those pretty words rich people whisper in their children's ears while combing their hair. Salt. Salt on your lips, salt in tiny cracks in your skin, salt in the air, giving you a little slap with every breath. It made you thirsty. It woke you up. It toughened you. And it constantly reminded you that the sea is always closer than any god.

I walked through the harbor as if through the open maw of an animal. Everything was damp, everything was greasy. The planks were black with dirt and fate. Fish blood, tar, piss, rum, vomit. The stuff stuck everywhere, even in people's heads. Some said they worked here. I said: We just rot standing still here.

The men who came ashore looked as if they'd been battling the wind and lost. Their eyes were red, their hands were battered, and their voices sounded like sandpaper. They talked a big game when they had money in their pockets. They talked a small game when they didn't. And most of the time, they didn't have any left before the sun had properly set. The rum ate up what was left, like rats at crumbs.

I was too young to be anything officially, but old enough to be useful. That is to say, old enough to carry things heavier than me, and old enough to be blamed when anything went wrong. When you grow up in a place like that, you're always to blame for something. Bad weather. Bad prices. A bad life. You're the lightning rod kid, taking the brunt of the punishment so the grown-ups can keep telling themselves they're still in control.

I often stood where the nets were unloaded. Sometimes the fish still glittered, as if to say: Look, we were briefly free. Then they lay in crates, staring at you with those dead eyes, and suddenly they were just merchandise. That's how it is with everything. With people, too. Especially with people.

The salt settled on my tongue, tasting of promises no one wanted to keep. It angered me, though I didn't know why. Perhaps because salt always reminds you: you can't hold onto anything. You can only grasp, and in the end, it still slips through your fingers. If you're lucky, a splinter sticks. If you're unlucky, all you're left with is the smell.

I often heard these stories about honor and seamanship and all that heroic posturing. Those who talked like that usually didn't even have the guts to look a starving dog in the eye. Honor is a word for people who don't have to survive every day. Those who truly survive don't talk about honor. They talk about food, sleep, dry boots. And sometimes not even that, because talking takes energy.

I stole, yes. And I stole better than most. Not because I was talented, but because I knew what it was like when your stomach clenched like a fist and you wondered whether you'd rather die or steal. Suddenly, stealing seems morally sound when you really think about it. The world hadn't given you anything. Why ask for its permission?

Once, a fat merchant grabbed me by the collar. His fingers smelled of coins and fear. He pulled me so close I could feel his breath, sweetish, like rotten fruit. He wanted to lecture me. He wanted to tell me I was a little bastard and would end up like all little bastards: in the dirt,

on the gallows, in the water, somewhere nameless. I grinned at him and said nothing. Because everything he said was already true. And because sometimes truth is the best insult.

He hit me. Once. Twice. And with the third blow, I bit his hand. Not a childish bite. I bit as if I were tearing off a piece of my future. He screamed like a pig, and I ran. Behind me he cursed, ahead the sea laughed softly. I felt blood in my mouth, his blood, and suddenly the salt tasted different. It no longer tasted of humility. It tasted of possibility.

Dirt was everywhere. Not just on the streets. Dirt was in the voices. In the glances. In the stories. If someone complimented you, they usually wanted to take something from you. If someone helped you, they were already mentally calculating the bill. I grew up being suspicious, like a stray dog. And like a stray dog, I could be friendly when necessary and bite when it was better to do so.

The heart? Yes, that was full of dirt too. Not romantic, not tragic, just practical. Dirt in the heart means: You expect nothing. You don't believe any smiles. You don't buy promises. You listen very carefully when someone says "trust me," because that usually means: run. And it also means: You will eventually do things that would keep you up at night if you were still the kind of person who sleeps like a child.

I saw men who were impeccably dressed in the morning, drunk at midday, fighting in the evening, crying at night. And the next morning, impeccably dressed again. That was their religion. The loop of shit that keeps closing. I vowed never to become like that. Not impeccably dressed. Not in a loop. If I was going to go down, at least I'd go down in a straight line, mouth agape, a damned curse on my lips.

Sometimes, when the wind was just right, it carried music from somewhere. A fiddle, a song, a few off-key lines. It sounded like people were fooling themselves. I liked that. Because it was honest. Everyone lies to themselves to keep from going crazy. Some do it with prayers. Some with rum. Some with songs. I only had the wind and this anger that kept my ribs warm.

I remember one evening sitting on the quay, staring at the black lines in the water. The sea looked like a big eye that never blinks. A man next to me spat into it and said, "The sea will take you, boy. Sooner or later." I said, "Then it better hurry up." He laughed, a short, raspy laugh, and I knew: That guy had already lost more than I had ever possessed.

This salt in my mouth, this filth in my heart—that was my education. No school could have taught me that. No teacher could have given me that without dying in the process. I learned that you either eat or be eaten, and that sometimes both taste the same. And I learned that the sea isn't just water. It's a promise you don't sign, you swallow.

And eventually, once you've swallowed enough, it starts working inside you. Like poison. Or like medicine. Depends on whether you survive.

The next morning I woke up to someone throwing up next to me. That was a good start. In some cities, you're woken by a bird, a church bell, a pleasant voice. In ours, it was vomit. Warm, sour, real. I blinked at the gray sky and thought: Okay, world, I'm back. Let's try again.

The guy who was throwing up was a sailor without a ship. The kind who staggers more on land than on deck. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, as if dignity were just a stain you could get rid of by rubbing hard enough. Then he grinned at me, toothless as an old

shark, and said, "Kid, when you're old enough, you'll realize: everything eventually tastes like salt. Even tears." I said, "I'm not crying." He laughed as if I'd told the best joke of the century.

I got up, brushed the dirt off my trousers, and only then realized I'd been lying in the wind all night. The wind had written its opinion all over my face. My skin was taut, my lips were chapped, and I felt as alive as a knife. So alive you could cut yourself on it.

The harbor was noisy again. Always noisy. As if silence were a crime. Men were hauling crates, women were shouting for money, children were screaming for everything. One dog was biting another's tail, and both acted as if it were normal. It was normal.

I went to the barrels where the cheap swill was sold. Not because I wanted to drink. Not right away. But because that's where the conversations happened. There, where the light was dim and morals even worse. There you heard who was about to run away, who was about to die, who was about to kill someone. We didn't have news. We had rumors and scars.

A man with eyes like dull glass told me that a ship had arrived from the Caribbean. Sugar, tobacco, a little gold, a little misery, all mixed together. He swore he'd seen a sailor whose ear had been cut off, yet he was laughing as if he'd just received a present. I thought: Maybe laughter is just another way of insulting pain.

I moved closer, pretended not to hear anything, and heard everything. The men were talking about storms, about diseases, about captains who treated their crews like cattle. One said, "The captain is God on board." I thought: Then I don't want to pray. If that's what God is, then I'd rather eat dirt.

Someone bumped into me. A burly fellow, red nose, thin hair, and a lot of opinions. He smelled of old rum and fresh anger. "Hey, you snot-nosed brat," he said, "what are you staring at? Want to be a sailor?"

I looked at him long enough that he became uneasy. Then I said, "No. I don't want to be a sailor. I just want to get away from here." That was honest. And honesty makes people nervous because they don't know how to use you.

He laughed and spat in the dirt. "Away? Where to? There's only shit out there too." "Better than that shit," I said. He stared at me as if I'd punched him in the face. Then he grinned broadly. "You've got a loose mouth. I like that." He grabbed my chin as if he were examining me like a piece of meat. I slapped his hand away. His grin remained, but his eyes turned cold. "You're not a good boy." "You're not a good man," I said. It slipped out like a knife from its sheath.

He took a step toward me. I already saw the fist. I already saw the ground. I already saw blood. And I was ready to bite him, to scratch him, to tear him apart, if necessary. Not because I was brave. But because I knew that giving in makes you small forever. And being small is like a sign on your forehead: Please kick.

But before he could strike, someone grabbed him from behind by the collar and pulled him away as if he were a sack of potatoes. Another sailor. Tall, calm, with shoulders like a doorframe. The burly fellow cursed, but he calmed down immediately, like a dog that knows who's the bigger dog. The tall one looked at me. No warmth, but no hatred either. Just a look that says: You're interesting. But interesting doesn't automatically mean safe.

"You want to leave," he said. Not as a question. "Yes," I said.

"Then learn to control your tongue," he said. "Otherwise it will eat you." "Maybe I'd better eat first," I said.

He snorted softly. It might have been a laugh. Then he turned and walked away. The burly guy flipped me the bird and muttered something about "I'll get you yet." I waved at him, politely. Sometimes politeness is the best insult.

Later that day, I was hauling sacks for a trader who gave me less than he'd promised. I didn't let on. I took the money, felt the coins in my hand, and thought: This isn't payment. This is training. The world is constantly testing you. It dangles little injustices in front of you like bait. You swallow them if you're stupid. Or you memorize the name and wait for the right moment.

I walked along the quay where the ships were moored. Big, proud things. Some freshly painted, some old and scarred. I placed my hand on a railing and felt the wood, rough and salty. There's something calming about wood. It's honest. It was once a tree. Then it was cut, felled, shaped. Just like people. Only wood doesn't complain so loudly.

A few sailors stood on deck and gave me looks that were somewhere between mockery and interest. One shouted, "Hey, kid! Got balls or just dirt in your pants?" I shouted back, "I've got balls. But dirt makes it spicier." Laughter. One of them tapped on the railing. "That kid's got a mouth." "A mouth is good," said another. "As long as he can work."

I stopped, looked up, and imagined what it would be like to stand up there. Not as a spectator. As someone who belongs. Not out of love. Out of necessity. A ship is not a home. It's a flying cage that moves. But sometimes, movement is all you need to keep from rotting away.

As the sun set, it turned the water red, as if someone had sliced the world open. I stood there, licking my lips. Salt. Always salt. It was like a damned vow I'd never spoken, yet kept.

The filth in my heart grew heavier, but also clearer. It became something that not only hurt, but also drove me on. I thought of the Great One who had dragged me away without truly saving me. I thought of the sailors who had laughed. I thought of the wood, the water, that cry that pounded in my skull like a fist against a door.

I knew: I wouldn't grow old if I stayed. Perhaps I wouldn't grow old if I left either. But at least I would leave while I could still stand.

The rain came during the night, as if the sky had had enough of us. It splashed onto the roofs, the quays, the faces of the men who were still standing outside, pretending to be indestructible. Rain is the great equalizer: it makes rich coats heavy and poor shirts see-through. It strips you of every pose and leaves only the bones.

I sat under an overhang so full of holes it barely did its job, watching the water run in puddles as if trying to escape. A few steps away, two men were fighting over a dry spot. Not over money, not over women, not over honor. Over dry boards. That was the kind of war we fought.

The tall one who had pulled me away during the day reappeared. As if he'd smelled me. He stood next to me without looking at me. He had a bottle in his hand, but he wasn't drinking. That was almost suspicious.

"You're tough," he finally said.

"I'm just not dead yet," I said.

He nodded, as if that were the only sensible answer. Then he held out the bottle. I took it. Rum, cheap, burned like a bad thought. I swallowed anyway. The sip went down, leaving warmth, but also a void, as if it were washing something out of me that I might still have needed.

"What's your name?" he asked.

I shrugged. "They never really used them."

He did look at me now, briefly, like a knife-edge. "Everyone has a name."

"Then give me one," I said, and I meant it half as a joke, half as a challenge.

He breathed that almost-laughing sound again. "You don't give names. You take names."

I liked that. It sounded like the truth. Like something you hang around your neck like a necklace made of teeth.

"You want to go on a ship," he said. Again, not as a question.

"I want to leave."

"The road is big," he said, "and big eats little people."

"Then I'll just have to grow bigger."

He looked me up and down, as if checking whether I already smelled bad or would only start to smell bad later. Then he said, "Tomorrow morning. When the sun is still undecided about rising. Come to the third mast at the end of the quay. Not before. Not after."

"And what if I don't come?"

"Then you'll stay here and become exactly what you already hate." He took the bottle back as if that ended the conversation and disappeared into the rain.

I remained seated, feeling my heart beat. Not fast. Not panicky. More like a hammer slowly and steadily driving a nail into the ground. I knew it was an offer, but also a trap. Everything is a trap. Only the size changes.

I barely slept that night. Not because I was afraid. I'd had enough fear in my life; it tasted like bread. I was awake because my mind couldn't decide whether to laugh or scream. This was the moment when things changed. And you only notice a change of direction when you're already in the middle of it.

Outside I heard footsteps, laughter, arguments, the clatter of wet wood. Somewhere a man was yelling for his wife as if she were a lost shoe. Somewhere no one answered. I lay on a sack that smelled of stale grain and stared into the darkness. The salt clung to my lips. Even in my sleep it was there. As a memory. As a threat.

When it finally got light, the sky was so gray you'd think it was ashamed. I stood up, rubbed the cold from my bones, and set off. The harbor was quieter than usual. Not peaceful. Just tired. It was the silence before the next mess.

The third mast stood there like a finger pointing at me. I stopped a few paces away, not wanting to look like a dog at the food bowl too soon. Then I saw the tall one. He had two other men with him. One was as thin as a rope and had eyes that never stopped moving. The other was broad and had a scar running across his face as if someone had tried to erase it.

"There he is," said the thin man. He sounded disappointed, as if he had been hoping for a monster.

"You have come," said the tall one.

"You told me to come."

"Some people have hearing difficulties," said the man with the scar. "Or they are cowards."

I looked at him. "I hear well."

He grinned. "That's something, at least."

The tall man nodded at a ship moored a little farther away. Not the biggest. Not the most beautiful. But it had something about it. It looked as if it had already survived things other ships wouldn't even dare to speak of. The planks were dark, the ropes taut, and on deck stood men pretending they were sleep-deprived and had too many reasons to be angry.

"You work," said the tall one. "You keep your mouth shut when you have nothing clever to say. And when you do have something clever to say, you think twice about whether you'll say it anyway."

"I don't intend to make myself popular," I said.

"Being popular is for whores and saints," he said. "You want to survive."

I nodded. That was the only contract I knew.

The thin man stepped closer, smelled me as if I were a barrel. "The little guy stinks of the harbor."

"You reek of fear," I said.

The scar laughed aloud. The thin one curled his lip, but said nothing. The tall one looked at me again with that knife-like gaze and nodded slowly. "You're a quick learner."

Then came the moment that people later like to dramatize. In stories, there are drums, violins, seagulls, beams of light. For me, there was only wet wood under my feet and the taste of salt in my mouth. I placed my foot on the plank that led from the quay to the ship and realized: This isn't a step. This is a cut. You're cutting yourself off from what you know and hoping you don't bleed to death.

On the other side stood a man with a face like a crumpled piece of paper being smoothed out again. He had the kind of eyes that don't look at you, but rather assess you. How heavy. How useful. How replaceable.

"What can he do?" he asked.

"Bite," said the one with the scar.

"Running," said the thin man.

The tall man said, "He wants to leave."

The man with the paper face spat to the side. "That's what they all want. Away from what?"

I said: "About a life that doesn't want me."

He studied me for a long time. Then he shrugged. "Scrub. Carry. If you steal, steal cleverly. If you lie, lie better. And if you die, do it quietly."

"I don't do anything quietly," I said.

He grinned, thin and dirty. "Then you'll have fun."

I walked past him and stepped onto the deck. The wind hit me like an old friend who greets you with a slap. I inhaled the air. Salt. Tar. Smoke. Dirt. And underneath it all, something else: freedom that wasn't yet clean. Freedom that stinks. Just my kind.

I saw the men, the ropes, the sails, the crates. I heard the voices, the creaking, the soft, deep sound of the water against the hull. And somewhere deep inside me, something grinned. Not kindly. Not warmly. More like an animal that had finally chewed through its leash.

I spat over the railing. The sea took it without reacting. It never reacts immediately. It just remembers everything. I wiped my mouth. The salt remained. So did the filth in my heart. But now it had a direction.

The first rum was a mistake

The first rum wasn't the start of anything romantic. No "Ahoy," no sunset, no song. The first rum was a mistake, a burning, stinking kick in the gut, and I gave it to myself like an idiot desperate to know if the stove is really hot.

Everything on board smelled of never-ending work. Tar, wet wood, the sweat of men who had learned that fatigue was no reason to stop. The ship wasn't a home. It was a machine that would swallow you and spit you out again if you were lucky. If you were unlucky, it would only spit out your bones. And even those, really, belonged to the sea.

I was the boy. The little one. The newbie. Which meant: I was the target. For jokes, for beatings, for chores no one else wanted to do. They gave me buckets bigger than my future. They showed me spots to scrub, and when I was finished, they were suddenly dirty again. That wasn't work. That was discipline. That was their way of saying: You are nothing until we decide you are something.

The one with the papery face—they called him Briggs because men like him always have names like they'd been pulled out of a barrel—put me in front of a row of barrels, like I was at the damn market. He tapped my head, as if checking if anything rattled inside.

"You eat when there's food," he said. "You sleep when you're allowed. You talk when you're asked. And you don't drink."

He said the last word slowly, as if he wanted to carve it into my flesh. Drinking was clearly for men. And I wasn't a man. Not yet.

I nodded because nodding is cheap. But something inside me was grinning. Not because I wanted to make fun of him. But because I knew that prohibitions on a ship are as sure as a hole in a bucket: you only notice them when everything's already gone.

The days were one long, drawn-out cycle. Wake up in the morning, work, curse, work, eat, work, sleep, work, wake up again. The sea was always there, like an eye that never blinks. It saw everything, said nothing, waited. And suddenly I was right in the middle of it, a tiny speck of dirt on a piece of wood that thought it was important.

The men were different, yet also the same. Some were quiet because they had talked too much in life. Some were loud because they were afraid of silence. One always had a song on his lips, but he couldn't sing. He sang anyway. I found that admirable. Bad art is still better than no art at all. At least at sea.

And then there was the rum.

Rum wasn't just alcohol. Rum was currency, solace, a weapon, religion, an apology. Rum turned a bad day into a bearable one, and a bearable one into a dangerous one. Rum was the little devil in the bottle, whispering in your ear: Screw it. And "screw it" is one of the most frequently used philosophies of life on a ship.

I saw them drinking, secretly and openly, from cups, from bottles, from anything that wouldn't run away. They drank after scrubbing, after setting sail, after cursing, after fighting.

One drank because he wanted to wash the trembling from his hands. Another because he wanted to remember something. That's the funny thing: some drink to forget, others drink to feel anything at all.

Briggs managed to uphold his ban for a few days, which was almost an achievement in itself. Then came a night when the wind whistled so off-key, as if it were trying to vomit, and the men sat huddled in a corner they called the "galley," as if it were a cozy word for a room filled with grease and despair.

I should have been asleep. I lay in my corner, listening to laughter, clinking cups, that deep, contented sound men make when they're slowly poisoning themselves while pretending it's a celebration. The sound lured me. Not like music. More like the smell of food when you're hungry.

I stood up. Quietly. Not because I wanted to be quiet. But because I knew that some stupid things are better done in secret, so you don't have to explain them later.

I crept closer and stood in the shadows. The thin one—the one with the nervous eyes, who heard everything before it was spoken—saw me first. He grinned, and his grin was like a knife already gleeful.

"Look," he said, "the little one has legs."

"The little one is thirsty too," said another, and laughter rolled through the room like a wave of snot.

I said nothing. I just saw the bottle. It stood there, half empty, as if offering itself. And I realized I wasn't just thirsty. I was curious. Curiosity is worse than thirst. You can quench thirst. You can't quench curiosity. Curiosity stays and eats you from the inside out until you either give in or go crazy.

Briggs was there too. He stared at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to send me back. But then he shrugged, as if he'd just decided he didn't give a damn about my future.

"One sip," he said. "Then back again. And if you throw up, you clean it up yourself."

That wasn't permission. That was a bet.

The skinny guy slid the bottle towards me as if he were giving me a gift. I took it, and everyone's eyes were glued to me. That was the moment when you either become a joke or a problem. I didn't want to be a joke.

I began.

The rum was warm and sharp, tasting of wood left too long in the sun, of burnt sugar, of decisions you'll regret tomorrow. It burned down my throat, and my first instinct was to cough, to gag, to throw the bottle away. But I swallowed. I forced it down. I felt it working inside me, spreading, igniting my stomach.

The men cheered as if I'd ridden a bull. One of them patted me on the back so hard I almost jumped up. I stayed still, just stared at the bottle and thought: That's it? Is that what they're making such a fuss about?

Then came the second sip. Not because I needed it, but because I didn't want them to think the first one had defeated me.

The second one was worse. Not in taste. In feeling. Suddenly there was a warmth, not just in my stomach, but in my head. A kind of false light. Everything became a touch more fun, a touch less important. That's the dangerous thing about rum: it doesn't make your misery disappear. It just coats it with a greasy layer of shine, so you can bear yourself better.

I laughed. I laughed even though nothing was funny. And the laughter sounded strange to my ears, as if someone else were speaking through my mouth. I didn't like that. And that's exactly where I should have stopped.

But quitting was never my strong suit.

The thin man leaned towards me. "Well, little one," he said, "now you're one of us."

I looked at him and thought: If that's true, then this is a damn bad club.

The rum was a mistake. Not because it burned. But because it briefly gave me the feeling that I wasn't alone. And I knew immediately: that feeling was a lie. As much a lie as every smile in the harbor. As much a lie as every promise made by a man who's already half drunk.

Nevertheless, I picked up the bottle again.

I picked up the bottle again, as if it had just promised to make me a better person. What a load of rubbish. Rum doesn't make you better. Rum just makes you louder in your own head. And if your head is already a dirty mess, then it'll just turn into a carnival in there.

I took another sip. Not a big one. Not a brave one. Just enough for the men to grin and for me to convince myself I was in control. Control is a nice fairy tale men tell themselves so they can sleep at night. You don't sleep well at sea anyway. So you don't need a fairy tale.

The skinny guy sat down next to me, much too close, and reeked of onions and envy. "You have talent," he said, and patted my thigh as if I were his dog.

"Talent for what?" I asked.

"For drinking."

I laughed, and my laughter sounded wrong again, as if it weren't my own. "Then I'm saved."

He chuckled. "No one will be saved here."

He was right about that. And that's precisely why it was so ridiculous that I was sitting there as if it were a damn holiday. The room was warm, the air thick, and somewhere water was dripping into a bucket, as if the ship itself were slowly sweating. The sound grated on my

nerves. It reminded me that everything up here is waiting for something: for a storm, for trouble, for the moment you make a mistake and it devours you.

Briggs watched me out of the corner of his eye. He pretended not to care, but men like Briggs like to play God. Not for power. Out of boredom. If you're stuck on a piece of wood in the middle of the ocean long enough, you either become philosophical or you become an asshole. Briggs didn't have time for philosophy.

"The little one shouldn't think he's something special now," one person said.

"He's special," said another. "He's young. That's rare."

They laughed, and I felt the warmth rising to my head, like a tide that has no plan. I wanted to get up and go outside. I wanted to drink water. I wanted to be sensible. But being sensible was never my job. Besides, I was too proud to run away now. You don't run away from a bottle when ten men are watching. You stay put and pretend you're going to eat the bottle.

So I stayed.

They told stories. Bad stories, good stories, stories that probably hadn't even happened. One man swore he'd seen a woman in Tortuga kissing men with a knife and slitting their throats. Another claimed he'd seen a ship sailing without a crew, and at night he'd heard footsteps on deck. I thought: Maybe the ship was smarter than we were. Maybe it had simply thrown the people off.

The more they talked, the less the words meant. They became sounds, waves of laughter, the kind of noise that exists only to drown out fear. The rum softened my thoughts, like bread in water. I didn't like that. I liked my thoughts hard. Sharp. Useful.

The skinny guy pushed the bottle back towards me as if it were a microphone. "Show us you've got balls."

"I have balls," I said. "But you're acting like eggs are a reason to get drunk."

The laughter faltered briefly, a slight stutter, as if someone had thrown a stone into the gears. The thin man grinned thinly. He didn't like being reflected in his reflection. Nobody does.

"You talk too much," said Briggs.

"I listen to too much too," I said.

"Then stop," he said.

"That's not possible," I said. "The ship is making noises."

A few laughed again. Not because it was particularly funny, but because they sensed the climax was imminent. People love the moment before things go wrong. It's like the first crack in the ice, if you're into that sort of thing: exciting, as long as you're not the one who falls through.

The thin man leaned forward. His eyes were tiny knives. "You're cheeky."

"And you're boring," I said, and in my head it looked like a perfect hit. In reality, it was a stupid blow. Rum makes you brave, but it also blinds you to the consequences.

Briggs stood up. "Enough."

I should have stood up. I should have left. I should have kept my mouth shut. But I was warm in my head and cold in my pride.

The thin one also stood up. "The little guy thinks he's funny."

"The little one is thinking," I said. "That's more than some people here."

That was it. That was the moment when the mistake started to show its teeth.

He struck. Quickly, not particularly hard, but with the determination to show me, before everyone else, who was in charge. I took a step back, tripped over something that had probably been lying there for years, and felt the blood rush to my lip. The taste was instantaneous: salt and iron. A familiar combination.

I could have protected myself. I could have stayed small. But that was never my talent.

I lunged forward and rammed my forehead into his face. No technique, no style, just rage. His head snapped back, and for a moment he looked like a man who'd just discovered the world isn't fair. Welcome, I thought. Glad you finally figured it out.

He staggered, and I grabbed his shirt and pulled him down, right inside me, right into my hands. I felt his bones, his warmth, his breath, and I struck him, once, twice, without rhythm, without artifice, just so he would understand: I am not your toy.

Someone grabbed me from behind. Someone pulled. Someone yelled. Voices swelled into a thick knot. I lashed out, hitting someone in the shin, heard a curse, and grinned even though blood was running from my mouth. That was the only genuine smile of the evening.

Briggs roared so loudly that even the rum briefly showed respect. "Out! Both of you! On deck!"

They dragged us upwards. The wind whipped my face, robbing me of the rum's warmth like a thief. Suddenly everything was clearer. Colder. And I realized how queasy my stomach was. The rum sat inside me, offended, as if I had mistreated it.

The thin man spat out blood and gasped. "You little bastard."

"You too," I said, wiping my mouth. My hand came back red. It looked good. Not pretty. Good.

Briggs stood before us, legs wide apart, as if the deck were his damned domain. Behind him stood two men who looked as if they'd rather throw someone overboard than talk. The sea gurgled darkly beside us, as if it were listening.

"Rule one," said Briggs. "You don't hit without a reason."

I said, "He started it."

"Rule two," said Briggs. "You don't hit when you're drunk."

I opened my mouth, but there was nothing intelligent in it. Just this stale burning sensation and the thought that I had built this myself.

The thin man grinned crookedly. "See? Mistakes."

"Shut up," Briggs said. Then he looked at me. "You want to stay here?"

I nodded.

"Then you'll learn now," he said. "Rum is not a friend. Rum is a tool. And you were just the nail."

I swallowed. My stomach twitched. The wind stung my eyes. I didn't want to throw up. Not here. Not in front of them. But the rum had other plans.

It came suddenly, hot and bitter. I just managed to turn to the railing and vomited into the sea all damned night. The sea took it, patiently as ever. It takes everything. It doesn't judge. It just waits until you make enough mistakes.

A few people behind me laughed. Not maliciously, more with relief. The little guy is just a little guy, after all. I wiped my mouth and breathed through my nose. Salt. Always salt.

Briggs stepped closer. "You wipe that up. And tomorrow you'll be scrubbing again. And if you drink again before I allow it, you won't just be cleaning the deck. You'll be cleaning the inside of a barrel they put you in."

I looked at him. "Understood."

He nodded. "Good. And one more thing: The first rum is always a mistake. The second is a decision. Remember the difference."

I remembered it. Not because I wanted to be good. But because I knew that decisions are eventually all you have left.

As they sent us away, I stood at the railing for a moment. The sea smelled of cold and possibilities. I spat again, this time only saliva, and whispered: You won't get me that easily.

The sea didn't answer. It never answers. It just remembers everything.

The next morning, my mouth tasted like an ashtray that'd been rinsed in salt water. I lay in my corner, my head heavy as a wet sack, and my stomach felt like I'd tied it to a cannon and fired it overnight. I wish I could say I'd learned my lesson. But learning is a funny thing. You don't learn because you're smart. You learn because you get your ass kicked too often and eventually get fed up with picking up your teeth.

The wind was cold. It crept under my clothes as if it had personal reasons to hate me. I heaved myself up, feeling every bone, every bruise I'd lit with rum yesterday, and stood up. There

was already movement outside. The ship was never still. It was like an animal that twitches even in its sleep.

I went on deck and saw the Thin One. He was sitting on a crate, holding a cup to his lip and staring into the void, as if hoping that the void would stare back and agree with him. His nose was swollen, one eye half-closed, and his pride hung from his face like a wet rag. When he saw me, his hand twitched briefly, as if it wanted to strike again. Then he stopped. Perhaps he'd already had enough humiliation for breakfast today.

"Tomorrow," I said.

He spat to the side. "Die."

"Later," I said. "I'm busy today."

He growled, but said nothing more. Silence is often the beginning of respect. Or of murder. Both can be useful.

Briggs was already waiting with a mop, which he tossed to me as if I were a dog and the thing a stick. "Here," he said. "Clean it up."

I looked out onto the deck. It was clean enough, considering we were living on a floating pile of wood, constantly bathed in salt and grime. But Briggs didn't want cleanliness. He wanted obedience. Or at least the illusion of it.

I knelt down and scrubbed. The bristles scraped across the planks, water splashed, the smell of old rum rose from the wood, as if the deck itself had drunk and was now giving off the fumes. Every stroke was like a punishment. Not for the rum. For the audacity. For thinking I could break the rules here and still get away with it.

After a while, my movements became even. Scrubbing has something meditative about it when you have nothing else to do. You push, you pull, you breathe. Thoughts come and go. And somewhere in between, something like calm emerges. A thin layer of calm that you can scrape away again at any time.

A shadow fell upon me. I looked up. The man with the scar was standing there. He was grinning, as if he had seen a play he enjoyed last night.

"You gave him a good thrashing," he said.

"He deserves it," I said.

"Deserved," he repeated, spitting. "There's no such thing as earned at sea. Here, you only get."

"Then I got it," I said.

He laughed softly. "You'll either become very useful or very dead."

"Which is better?"

"Depends on who you ask." He scratched his stubbled chin. "You drank like a novice yesterday."

"I am a beginner."

"Yes. But you also fought like someone who doesn't like to lose." He leaned forward. "Rum isn't the enemy. The enemy is when you think rum makes you great. Rum just makes you loose. And loose means: you drop something. Mostly yourself."

I kept scrubbing. "Why does everyone only say that after you've thrown up?"

"Because nobody listens before that."

That was a truth I liked. Short, wicked, clean.

Later, when the sun was high enough to mock us, Briggs came back. He had his hands behind his back, as if he were a gentleman, and the eyes of a man who had already decided who you were before you even opened your mouth.

"You're working," he said. "Good. You won't die immediately. That's good too."

I said nothing. Briggs didn't want answers. He wanted an effect.

"And you will keep watch tonight," he said.

"Guard for what?"

He looked at me as if I were truly stupid. "For everything. For thieves. For fire. For stupidity. For men who are drunk and think they are immortal."

I felt a brief flush in my back. Not from pride. From anger. Being on guard was both punishment and a test. You stand alone, the wind is consuming you, and you have time to reflect on your mistakes. Mistakes like company. They thrive in silence.

As darkness fell, I stood at the railing. The sea was black, with only the occasional glimmer, as if blinking with cold eyes. The ship creaked, breathed, lived. Behind me, men snored, groaned in their sleep, cursed softly, as if still fighting in their dreams. In the distance, somewhere on deck, someone laughed into the night. A short, broken laugh. Then there was only wind again.

And then I smelled it.

Rum.

Not the official one, the one that's handed out if the day has been long enough or the captain is feeling merciful. The secret one. The one they hide away like a lover. I didn't follow the scent like a dog, but like a man who wants to know who holds which cards. I walked slowly, as quietly as I could, and found the thin man behind some crates. He was holding a bottle, taking small sips as if in prayer, staring into the darkness.

He noticed me too late.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"Just looking," I said.

"Looking costs money," he said, and his voice was poison.

I stepped closer. "You're drinking again."

"I drink when I want."

"And yesterday you tried to tell me I should show respect."

He showed me the bottle. "Do you want it?"

There it was. That damned temptation. Not thirst. Pride. The thought: I can do this better now. I can prove that I'm not just a puking boy.

I looked at the bottle. I saw his swollen eye. I saw the darkness around us, that vast, greedy nothingness just waiting for you to make a mistake. And suddenly I realized the rum wasn't the problem. The problem was that someone else wanted to decide who I was.

I didn't take the bottle.

"Keep your filth to yourself," I said.

His grin flickered briefly, uncertainly. "Afraid?"

I shook my head. "Not the rum. The rum I say when it speaks to me."

He stared at me as if I'd just pulled his teeth out. "You think you're smart."

"I consider myself tired," I said. "And I'm not so tired that I'd sell myself out just to make you feel better."

He jumped up, staggered, the bottle in his hand. "You little—"

"Yes," I said. "Exactly. Smaller. But I'm growing."

He took a step forward, then stopped. Maybe because he sensed I wasn't feeling soft today. Maybe because he sensed that with rum in his belly, he wasn't in a good position. He raised the bottle and took a big swig, as if it would win him. But it only made him lose faster.

I turned and went back to my watch. The wind cut my face, and I was grateful for it. Cold is honest. It makes no promises.

I stood at the railing again, staring into the darkness, and realized that on this ship, every man has something that drives him. For some, it's money. For some, fear. For some, a woman far away, perhaps already with someone else. For most, it's rum. Rum is the leash they put around their own necks, so they have something to hold onto.

I'd get myself a leash, too. Everyone needs one. But I wanted one that wouldn't make me drunk. One that wouldn't make me weak. One that wouldn't let me lose control, especially when it really matters.

The first time was a mistake, yes. But the bigger mistake would have been to believe that mistakes don't come back. They always come back. They knock like old friends. And each time you decide anew whether to open the door.

The sea was silent, as always. But I had the feeling it was listening. And I knew: The men around me had nothing left to lose except the illusion that they still possessed something. Perhaps that was their freedom. Perhaps that was their downfall. Probably both.

Men who had nothing left to lose

On the third day at sea, I understood what kind of crew they really were. Not in daylight, not while working, not while shouting orders. You only see that at night, when the wind dies down and the men begin to breathe as they truly are. Then you hear it in the pauses between the sounds: that thin, broken thing inside them that might once have been hope, before someone crushed it.

Most of those on board had nothing left to lose. And that's more dangerous than being armed. Many are armed. But having nothing to lose – that's like pushing a burning barrel downhill and hoping it rolls past you.

There was the one with the scar, who always grinned, as if he'd watched the world fool itself one too many times. His name was Tom, but no one called him Tom except when he'd been in trouble. Then he was suddenly "Tom," like a kid caught in the act. Tom had once served on a merchant ship, he said, and an officer had given him a lecture about discipline. Tom listened patiently, nodded obediently, waited until nightfall, and pushed the officer overboard. "Discipline," he said, "is just a word for people who are afraid others will realize how little they're worth." He said it with a smile, as if it were a joke. I laughed along, but I remembered the sentence because it felt like a needle under my skin.

Then there was Briggs, this paper-thin face with the eyes of a man who'd seen it all and was still surprised by how stupid people could be. Briggs wasn't a monster. Monsters are too neat to be an explanation. Briggs was more like the guy who eventually realized that kindness drags you through the mud, and then simply decided never to be kind again. It doesn't make you happy, but it does make you more invulnerable. Almost.

And the skinny guy who got on my nerves was really just a symptom. He was one of those people who are afraid of being ignored. So they make noise. They bicker, they fight, they drink, they talk about women like they're pieces of furniture you can push around. In reality, the guy had nothing inside him but trembling. Maybe he'd once been a boy who just wanted to get away. But somewhere along the way, he decided it was easier to kick downwards than to climb upwards.

There was also an old man who went by the name of Harkness, when he answered at all. He was so thin that the wind probably only held him back out of respect. Harkness rarely spoke.

When he did, it was in short sentences that went in like nails into wood. Once, when we were raising a sail and I was tearing my fingers open, I said something cursing, something about damned ropes and damned life. Harkness didn't even look up and just said, "Pain is cheap. Stupidity is expensive." Then he went back to pulling on the line, as if that was the end of the conversation. I wanted to punch him and hug him at the same time. In the end, I did neither. I learned that some men are like maps. Ugly, crumpled, but if you throw them away, you'll get lost.

These men weren't heroes. And I've never had much respect for heroes. Heroes are usually just corpses with good marketing. No, these were men who had already lost before they even boarded the ship. Men who had nothing left on land but debt, shame, or a noose waiting for them. At sea, at least, they could pretend to be free. And sometimes they actually were, for a few hours between orders.

You could feel their past in every movement. In the way they held knives. In the way they laughed. The laughter was always too loud or too short, never normal. Normal is for people who don't have to hold onto their lives with both hands.

After a few days, I realized that the real rules weren't written down. They were in glances, in pauses, in the moment when a man is silent for too long and you wonder if he's thinking or if he's about to kill you. On a ship like that, silence is sometimes the loudest threat.

I stuck to the work. Scrubbing, hauling, climbing. My hands grew rough, my shoulders burned, my back became a piece of wood that you can never truly rest. But I liked it. Work is honest. It hurts, and sometimes it rewards you with the feeling that you can still go on. On land, I had often worked without knowing what for. Here I knew: so I wouldn't go overboard.

At night, when the watch changed, a few sat together, not out of friendship, but out of habit. People huddle together when they're afraid the darkness will take over too much. I often sat nearby, not right in the middle, but close enough to hear. They talked about things they had lost, without using the word "lost." One spoke of a woman who had called him "too soft" before running off with someone else. Another spoke of a brother who had "suddenly disappeared," which usually means: knife, canal, end of story. One spoke of a child he had never seen. These phrases hung in the air like smoke. No one made a big deal out of it. Grief is heavy, and you only take heavy things to sea if you really need them.

Tom eventually told me why he didn't stay on land anymore. We stood side by side, staring into the darkness, and he said, "On land, they wanted me to apologize." "For what?" I asked. "For fighting back." I nodded. I understood. Tom grinned. "I can apologize. Sure. I can dance, too. But why should I?" "Because it avoids trouble." "Trouble is the only thing that keeps me awake," he said, spitting into the night. "Without trouble, I fall asleep. And then I dream. And dreams are worse than trouble."

That was the moment I understood: These men aren't just dangerous because they know violence. They're dangerous because they no longer believe that anything will get better. When you no longer believe that things will get better, you stop being careful. You stop being considerate. You stop protecting yourself. Then you become a kind of force of nature. Not beautiful. Not noble. But real.

One evening a storm arose, not a large one, but enough to make the sea choppy and the ship begin to creak like a grumpy animal. The men suddenly became quieter, more focused. No

heroic talk. No frills. Just hands on the lines, eyes on the sails, curses that sounded more like prayers, though no one would admit it. I felt my heart race, not with fear, but with a cold respect. The sea then shows you who you are, without asking if you want to see it.

In a moment like that, you see who truly has nothing left to lose. Not those who are loud. Not those who constantly threaten. But those who remain calm because they don't care whether they die today or tomorrow. This calmness is sick. It's contagious. And I realized that I wanted it.

When the storm subsided, we sat there again, wet, tired, alive. One of them suddenly laughed and said, "See, God missed us again." Briggs replied, "God rarely hits his mark when he's drunk." The laughter was harsh, but genuine. I had to laugh too, even though I had no idea whether I believed in God or not. Maybe I only believed in the wind. At least the wind was there.

Later, when the men dispersed, I stood alone at the railing. The sea was dark and calm again, as if nothing had happened. It pretends it isn't hungry. That's its biggest joke. I licked my lips. Salt. Always salt. And deep inside, somewhere beneath the grime, I felt this pull. Not home. Not peace. Something else. A life so hard that at least it doesn't lie.

These men around me—damned wrecks, yes. But wrecks that float. And I was about to become one of them. Maybe that was the only honest thing that ever happened to me.

The next day, I realized that "nothing to lose" doesn't just mean you're short on money. It means you're beneath the surface of the rules. That you no longer believe in the punishments because you're already punished inside. There are men who behave decently because they're afraid of the consequences. And there are men who behave decently because they still want to protect something. A wife. A child. A reputation. A piece of their future. These guys had long since abandoned all of that in some harbor, between two nights and a bad deal.

Sometimes you could see it in the little things. The way they handled food. Some slurped as if someone was about to kick their plate away. Others chewed slowly, as if they didn't care whether they still had teeth tomorrow. One guy stuffed bread into his pocket, even though he wasn't supposed to. Not out of greed. Out of habit. That's the sad thing: if you've been hungry long enough, you don't just stop being hungry. You wear the hunger like a second skin.

And then there were the conversations about going home. They were always short. "When we get back," one of them would say, and then he'd fall silent, as if he'd just realized he was lying. Back where? To whom? To what life? Most had made enemies on land. Or debts. Or both. A few had done nothing but make a mess, and even that had eventually become too much for them.

I quickly learned that the most dangerous men aren't the ones constantly playing with knives. The most dangerous are the ones who keep their knives away because they don't need to show them. They know what they're doing. They know how silent a body becomes when you strike it in the right place. And they know that you don't need much force to take someone's future. Just the right moment.

Briggs often sent me out with Tom whenever something needed fixing or when one of the older crew members simply couldn't be bothered to get their hands dirty. Tom rarely talked about work. He talked about people. He explained to me how to tell who would sell you out

for an extra swig of rum. He explained how to survive on board, even though the ship is basically trying to kill you all the time.

"Most of them here," Tom said once, while we were re-laying a rope, "aren't angry. They're tired." "Tiredness makes you angry," I said. Tom grinned. "See? You're learning."

There was a man named Keene who always acted like he was somebody. Like he used to wear a better hat and hadn't ended up in this floating cesspool. Keene had manners, yes. He said "please" when he handed you the bucket. He said "thank you" when you did it. And that's exactly what made him creepy. Manners are sometimes just a nice wrapper for the same old shit.

Keene thought he was better than everyone else, and on a ship, that's an invitation. One evening, when the rum was flowing and our minds were starting to mellow, he made a comment about Harkness, the old man. He called him "worthless." Just like that, out of boredom. Harkness was sitting there, chewing on something, and for a moment I thought he hadn't heard. Then he slowly raised his eyes, as if he were just starting to see the world again.

"Worthless," Harkness repeated calmly.

Keene grinned, too broadly, too confidently. "Yeah. Worthless. You're just hanging around here like an old fart."

Harkness gave a small nod. Then he stood up. Not quickly. Not dramatically. He stood up like a man who knows the matter is already settled. Keene was still laughing, but his laughter suddenly sounded thin.

Harkness walked past Keene, wordlessly took the bottle from the table, took a sip, and put it back down. Then he said, "I once saw a man who also thought he was better. He's fertilizer now." And with that, he walked on, sat down again, and continued chewing as if nothing had happened.

Keene laughed again, but this time the laughter had a nervous edge. He'd realized he'd just kicked a dog, an old one, but one that still had teeth. Keene kept quiet later. At least for a while.

That was the kind of respect that mattered here. No respect for titles. No respect for birthright. Respect for the fact that someone has lived long enough to know how short everything is.

That night, when I was on watch again, I heard voices near the barrels. Not the usual rum-swilling idiots, giggling and spouting tall tales. This was quieter. More subdued. Like men talking when they don't want the wind to overhear.

I stayed in the shadows. I was young, but not stupid. I didn't want to belong. Not officially. I wanted to know.

Tom was there. The Thin One was there. And two others, one with an eye that never quite aligned properly, and one whose hands were so scarred they looked like old leather. They talked about Briggs. About the captain I hardly ever saw, because he liked to hide in his cabin like a king in a bad castle. They talked about how we should sail differently. That there was better prey out there. That you shouldn't work forever to feed someone else's hunger.

I heard phrases like "he's counting the barrels," "he's cutting the rations," and "he's acting like we're his dogs." Men can endure a lot, but if you cut their food, they suddenly become very religious—they don't pray, they sacrifice. And the one who cuts the rations is usually the first one targeted.

Tom said: "It's not even hate. It's just time." The one with the crooked eye said: "Time for what?" Tom replied: "Time for someone to fall."

I felt the back of my neck grow cold, even though the night was mild. Not from fear. From realization. This wasn't a team. This was a sack full of knives, and each knife was constantly considering which other knife it could stab next.

I should have left. I should have pretended I hadn't heard anything. But I stayed a moment too long. My foot slipped on a damp patch, just a small noise, but in the silence even a curse sounds like a cannon shot.

All heads turned. Four pairs of eyes, and each pair wanted something different. The skinny one wanted to eat me. Tom wanted to know if I was a danger. The others wanted to know if they needed me or wanted to throw me away.

"Who is there?" hissed the one with the leather hands.

I stepped into the dim light, my hands open, not submissive, just visible. "I," I said.

The thin one grinned. "The little one."

"He was listening," said the man with the crooked eye.

"I'm on guard," I said. "I can hear everything."

Tom took a step closer. "How long?"

"Long enough to know that you're not talking about fish," I said.

The thin man made a movement as if he wanted to grab me, but Tom raised his hand. "Leave him alone." Then he looked at me. "And?"

That was the question. And? Will you snitch? Will you let yourself be bought? Will you make yourself look important?

I laughed briefly. Not a pleasant laugh. "Who am I supposed to tell? Briggs? He'd rip my head off and then go back to sleep."

The one with the leather hands growled. "You're cheeky."

"I'm small," I said. "That's not the same."

Tom looked me over. "You want to stay here."

"I want to live," I said. "And to live means not standing between the boots of big men when they start kicking."

The thin one spat. "The little one is a coward."

I looked at him. "A coward is someone who drinks because you no longer know who you are."

He flinched as if I had hit him. Tom smiled, just a little. The one with the crooked eye laughed dryly.

Tom said, "He's right. And he's got a mouth."

"Mouths are dangerous," said the one with the leather hands.

"Everything is dangerous," I said. "Even sleeping. Especially sleeping."

Tom stepped closer, so close I could smell his breath, salt and old nights. "You heard it. You understood. That's enough. You shut up."

"I'll hold them," I said. "As long as no one tries to hold them back from me."

Tom nodded. "Good." Then he turned to the others. "We'll talk later."

They dissolved like shadows, and I was left alone. The sea gurgled beside the ship, as if amused by us. I stared into the darkness and thought: Men who have nothing left to lose aren't just dangerous. They're contagious. Their indifference seeps under your skin, makes you braver, dumber, freer.

And there I stood, a boy with salt in my mouth, and realized something inside me was smiling, but it wasn't a good smile. It was the smile of someone who understands: On this ship, every day is a gamble. And some men don't gamble with money. They gamble with blood.

The next morning, the air was so still it seemed suspicious. Such stillness is never peace. It's just the inhale before the blow. The ship glided across the water as if ashamed to make any noise. And the men on deck were quieter than usual. Not because they had suddenly become nice, but because everyone knew: if you're too loud, someone might hear you who's currently considering whether you're still needed.

I worked as usual. Scrubbing, pulling, carrying. I acted as if everything were normal, as if there hadn't been that conversation in the night, those words stuck in my head like splinters. Time for someone to fall. These weren't drunken fantasies. This was planning. And planning on a ship means: you're either part of it or part of the problem.

Tom walked past Briggs more often than usual without looking at him. The thin man was noticeably polite, which almost seemed like a confession. Harkness was silent as always, but his eyes were more alert, as if he hadn't slept the night away, but had been doing calculations. And I noticed how the crew was dividing into two kinds of men: those who had something planned, and those who didn't yet realize they were in the way.

Briggs noticed, of course. He wasn't an idiot. He was just an experienced asshole. He stood on the aft deck that morning, hands behind his back, scanning us as if counting how many he

might have to kill single-handedly. His face was calm, but there was that little flicker in his eyes that said: I smell trouble. And I don't want to deal with it, but I will if I have to.

"Double water ration today," he called out suddenly. Not friendly, not loudly. Just like that. As if he were throwing us a bone.

A few men muttered. Water wasn't a gift. Water was a weapon. Whoever rations water rations life. But double rations sound good at first, and that's exactly what he was counting on. On that brief, foolish relief. It was his way of showing us: I saw you. And I can still feed you like dogs.

Tom looked at me, just for a moment. That look contained a whole sentence: He's not stupid. And he's afraid. And fear makes him more dangerous.

Later, as I passed the barrels, I heard the thin man cursing softly. He was kneeling there, pretending to fix something, but in truth, he was simply angry that the world didn't take him seriously. Anger without direction destroys people. I knew the feeling. I stepped closer.

"You didn't sleep well," I said.

He looked up, and his gaze was like rancid rum. "Shut your mouth."

"Sure," I said. "I just wanted to hear if you've already decided who you're going to betray first."

He jumped up, faster than expected, grabbed me by the collar, and pulled me close. I smelled his breath, old, sour, as if he'd been licking the bottom of a bottle at night and found nothing.

"You know nothing," he hissed.

"I know enough to know that you're too loud for something like that," I said.

He pressed me against a barrel. Wood against my back, salt in the air. His fingers were firm, but they trembled. Fear. Always fear. It was like music with him, only the kind no one wants to hear.

"You're a little bastard," he said.

"And you're a big one," I said. "You can tell right away."

His hand twitched as if it wanted to strike. Then he let go and spat on the ground. "You think you're smarter than me."

"No," I said. "I just think I'm less drunk."

He huffed and turned away, as if he suddenly had something very important to do. I continued walking, calmly, but inside I was as tense as a rope about to snap. That was the problem: the longer you live among men who have nothing left to lose, the more you start to think that way yourself. Every glance becomes a question. Every pause a threat. And at some point, you no longer know if you're still a human being or just fulfilling a function: survival.

In the afternoon, the wind picked up, and the sea became choppy. Not dramatically, just enough to make the ship roll a little more. And work makes men irritable. Irritable men talk less. They act more. I saw Tom speak to the man with the leather hands, briefly, head to head, like two dogs sniffing each other, deciding whether to hunt together or tear each other's throats out.

Briggs made us work an extra hour, as if he'd suddenly become especially industrious. That was a weapon, too. Fatigue makes you soft. Fatigue makes you inattentive. And an inattentive man doesn't notice when a knife gets too close.

As the sun sank, the shadows lengthened, and the ship took on that gray look it always has in the evenings, when everything smells of metal and the world pretends to be innocent. I was assigned to help with the mainsail. My hands burned, my fingers were torn, but that's normal. Pain is normal. Anything else is suspicious.

Then something small happened. Exactly what always happens before something big happens.

A barrel rolled free from its restraint. Just a bit, a jerk, a dull thud. Nothing serious. But it could have been. Briggs' head jerked instantly in our direction. His gaze shot across the deck like a bolt. And I saw Tom touch a man's shoulder, just briefly, as if it were a signal. The man nodded.

Briggs walked slowly to the barrels, as if taking his time so everyone could see: I am not afraid. He stopped, looked at the barrel, then at the men working there.

"Who was that?" he asked.

No one answered. Of course not. Asking the wrong question is a sign of weakness.

Briggs' voice remained calm. "I want the name."

I felt everything around us harden. The wind grew colder, even though it stayed the same. That's the strange thing: you can feel tension like a change in the weather. You can smell it. And at that moment, it smelled like trouble.

One of the men—young, not as young as me, but young enough to still believe in things— took a step forward. Maybe he wanted to be honest. Maybe he wanted to help. Maybe he was just being stupid. He opened his mouth, hesitated, and in that second I saw Tom. Tom shook his head almost imperceptibly. The boy realized it too late.

"I—" he began.

Briggs didn't hit him. He did something worse. He smiled.

"Good," said Briggs. "You."

The boy blinked. "I don't have it—"

"You were there," Briggs said. "So you're responsible."

That was the world in a nutshell. You don't have to be guilty to be punished. You just have to be within reach.

Briggs grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him a step forward. "You're going below deck tonight. Alone. And you're going to count the barrels. If one's missing, you'll be missing a finger tomorrow. If two's missing, you'll be missing two. Simple business."

The boy went pale. He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. He looked around, seeking help in faces that had long since ceased to offer any help. No one said anything. No one moved. Men who have nothing left to lose save no one. At best, they save the plan.

And then I heard it. Not loud. Just a sound, like someone running their thumb across the edge of a knife. Maybe it was just the rope, maybe just a belt. But my body understood the sound before my mind did.

Tom took a step forward.

"Briggs," he said calmly.

Briggs slowly turned to him. "What."

"You want a name," said Tom. "Then take mine."

A few heads rose. This wasn't heroism. This was a door opening. And behind that door, there's always blood, even if no one wants to see it yet.

Briggs studied Tom. "You suddenly want to be fair?"

Tom shrugged. "Call it what you want."

Briggs' smile was thin. "You mean you can tell me what to do."

Tom said nothing. His silence was a blade.

And I stood there, one step behind everything, and understood: Now it will be decided who belongs to whom. Not with words. With the first wrong breath.

Briggs let Tom hang for a moment, then spat. "Count the barrels," he said, "but not below deck. Here. In front of everyone. So everyone can see how important you think you are."

Tom nodded. No relief. Just movement.

Briggs turned away as if that were settled. But it wasn't. Nothing is ever settled. It's only postponed.

I saw the boy standing there, his hands at his sides, his eyes blank. He had just barely escaped, but he now knew something that ages you: that on this ship you don't exist because you are human. You exist because you are used. And if you are not used, you are discarded.

I went back to work, my hands on the rope, the wind in my face. And as I pulled, something inside me pulled with me. That dark, cold clarity that says: Someday you won't just be a

spectator anymore. Someday you'll have to decide for yourself whether you belong to those who fall or those who push.

And very quietly, somewhere behind the salt, behind the dirt, I realized: A part of me was already looking forward to it.

The sea eats silently

The sea is no hero. It doesn't come with drums. It doesn't give speeches. It doesn't make grand gestures when it takes you. It's no hooded executioner, more like a hungry bastard sitting in the corner, waiting for you to stumble. And when you do fall, it's already there before you even realize you're falling.

In the countryside, you often hear death coming. There are screams, footsteps, doors slamming. There are neighbors staring, dogs barking, women covering their faces with their hands and pretending they haven't seen it coming for months. At sea, it's different. At sea, death is like a thief who doesn't even have the decency to punch you in the face. He simply takes you away, without noise, without drama. And the worst part is: it suits him.

We had a night when the wind was so calm that even the ropes stopped creaking. The ship glided as if trying hard not to wake anyone. The sky hung low, like a dirty cloth, and the stars were somewhere up there, probably drunk because they didn't want to look at the crap down here.

I was on deck either because I was on watch or because I couldn't sleep. On a ship like this, there's hardly any difference. Sleep is something you borrow, and usually the borrower comes by at night and takes it back, with interest.

The men lay scattered like discarded clothes. One snored as if he were competing with a pig to hear the loudest grunts. Another murmured words in his sleep that sounded like home, but not like a home that still wanted him. Tom sat a little further on, his back against the railing, staring into the darkness as if he could find answers there. Perhaps he was just looking for an excuse to push someone tomorrow.

Then I heard it: a soft scraping, somewhere forward, near the bow. No scream. No curse. Just a sound like someone's shoe sliding across wet wood. A sound that suddenly grows louder in the silence because everything else has ceased to distract you.

I approached slowly, not out of courage, but because you don't like being surprised on a ship. Surprises are for people who can talk about them later.

There was one standing at the bow. A sailor who talked a lot during the day and drank a lot at night. I didn't know his name. Names on board are like ropes: some are thick and hold, some snap, and most only matter to you when you're hanging from them. He had his hands on the railing, his upper body leaning forward, and he was swaying slightly. Not from the ship. From the stuff inside him. Rum turns a railing into an idea, instead of a boundary.

"Hey," I said quietly.

He didn't react. He stood there as if praying. Perhaps he was, in his drunken way. Perhaps he was talking to the water. Some men talk to water when they have no one left to answer them.

I stepped closer. The smell of rum was strong. The guy had more of the stuff in his blood than blood itself. His fingers gripped the wood, and yet he looked like he was about to give way. It was that image: a man holding on tight and still falling. That's the whole world in motion.

"You should lie down," I said.

Then he moved. Not towards me, but forward. As if he were taking a step. As if he wanted to walk. But there was no ground. Only air and then water.

He slipped.

It wasn't a dramatic fall. No "No!", no "Help!", no final, grand pronouncement later quoted in stories. He simply slid, and his body disappeared over the railing as if someone had pulled him up from below. A short, dull splash, nothing more. Like throwing a sack of potatoes into the harbor.

Then there was silence.

The sea didn't even make a sound of triumph. There was no surging, no foaming. Just a soft gurgling, as if it had swallowed something. And that was it.

I stared down. Of course I stared down. People always stare where something has just disappeared. As if they could bring it back with their eyes. I saw nothing. Just darkness, moving. A few ripples, a bit of shimmer. And somewhere down there, a man who was just realizing that rum can't float.

"Hey!" I finally shouted. Not out of hope. Out of reflex.

No one reacted immediately. Because the splash was too small. Because the wind was too calm. Because the sea eats silently.

Tom was suddenly beside me, as if he had cut himself out of the darkness. "What is it?"

"One of them has crossed over," I said.

Tom looked down, and there was nothing in his face. No shock. No sadness. Just this sober calculation: This happens. This will happen again.

He yelled behind him, "Man overboard!"

Now the ship came alive. Footsteps, curses, a lantern flickering as if frightened itself. Men stumbled from their corners, half awake, half dead, and suddenly they all had voices too loud for such a short night.

Briggs came too. Of course he came. He had to see his possessions disappearing. He leaned over the railing as if he were counting a barrel.

"Where?" he asked.

"Here," said Tom.

Briggs spat. "Damn it."

Someone threw a rope. It flew into the darkness and landed in nothingness. Another person threw a barrel, as if wood could save a person hanging around in their clothes, panicking. The barrel splashed, floated, spun. No one was attached to it. No hand. No scream.

And then came the moment when everyone realized: It's too late. Not because we were too slow. But because the sea is faster when it's hungry. And it's always hungry.

Briggs growled: "Lanterns higher!"

The lanterns were raised. Light flickered across the waves, like a drunk trying to walk straight. We saw foam, we saw black lines in the water, we saw this damned nothingness. But we saw no man.

"He can swim?" someone asked.

Tom laughed dryly. "With rum? He'll only end up in hell."

A few laughed along, because laughter is sometimes the only thing you can do when your heart would otherwise burst. Or because their heart had already burst long ago and they just hadn't realized it.

Briggs raised his voice. "Keep searching!"

But it was half-hearted. He knew it. We knew it. Searching is often just a way to soothe oneself. A show for the conscience, which is later put away again.

I stood there, still staring into the water. I wasn't thinking about the man. I was thinking about the splash. That tiny sound that spoke louder than any sermon. The sea devours silently, yes. And that's what makes it so damn disrespectful. It takes you without a second thought.

"You saw it?" asked Tom.

I nodded.

"He was drunk."

"Yes."

Tom shrugged. "He was already gone before he fell."

That was a sentence that stuck with me. Gone before it was even spoken. You can talk about many lives that way. Some are gone long before they truly die. They just wander around, eating, drinking, talking, waiting. The fall is merely a formality.

Briggs turned around. "Back to work," he said, as if only a bucket had just been knocked over. "He's not coming back."

That was it. No words. No moment. No prayer. No curse that burns long enough.

The men went their separate ways. Some shook their heads, some cursed, some yawned. A few would say tomorrow they'd almost had him. A few would say the sea was to blame. And no one would say: It was us. Because we let him drink. Because we let him rock. Because we all glance over the railing every day and imagine how easy it would be to just leave.

I stayed for another moment. The water was calm again, as if nothing had happened. It was like a face that instantly smooths itself after a blow. And that's exactly what made me angry. Not at the sea. At us. Because we accepted it. Because we acted as if one less person was just a number you adjust in your head.

Tom gave me a light nudge with his shoulder. "Come on," he said. "You'll get used to it."

I looked at him. "I don't want to."

He grinned, that crooked grin that never warms up. "You never want it to happen. And then it happens anyway."

I went back with him, and with every step I felt the salt on my lips. It tasted different than before. Not just like wind. Not just like freedom. It tasted like what the sea truly is: a vast, silent mouth.

And I knew: Someday it would consume me too. Perhaps silently. Perhaps laughing. Perhaps mid-sentence.

But until then, I would at least give him something to chew on.

The next morning, the space at the bow was empty, as if no one had ever been there. That's the outrageous thing about the sea: it takes a man from you and doesn't even leave you a void large enough to grieve properly. It smooths everything over. It makes the surface pretty. And underneath, it's rotting.

The sun rose like a rotten orange. No radiance, no solace. Just light that forces you to see the faces you'd rather not have seen at night. Some men acted as if nothing had happened. That sort of person lives longer because they've trained their heart to stop beating. Others were quieter than usual, but not out of respect. Rather, because they'd realized how quickly you can go from "here" to "gone" with just one wrong breath.

Briggs made us line up like we were soldiers. Ridiculous. Soldiers have uniforms and some idea of what they're dying for. All we had were wet clothes and the smell of tar.

He stood with his legs wide apart, his gaze sweeping over us as if taking stock of what was left and what was missing. One less man. One less piece of meat. One less pair of hands. He didn't say the name. Perhaps he didn't know it. Perhaps he didn't want to know it. Names make things real, and reality is sometimes uncomfortable.

"Who saw it?" asked Briggs.

A few heads turned up, mine included. I said nothing. Tom said nothing either. Not because we were scared. But because Briggs already knew. Questions with him are rarely real questions. They're just a way to make you willingly walk into his hands.

Briggs nodded, as if he'd ticked off an invisible list. "Then listen," he said. "The sea takes. That's its job. Our job is not to be stupid."

A few men grinned. One muttered, "Too late." Briggs heard it but pretended not to. That, too, is power: you decide which words are allowed to exist.

"From today on," he continued, "no one goes forward alone after drinking. Those who are drunk stay where they are. Those who see someone else staggering, grab hold of them. Not out of friendship. For their own benefit."

There was that word again, the one no one spoke aloud, but everyone lived by: utility. You don't hold on to someone because you like them. You hold on to them so they'll still be able to pull tomorrow if the rope breaks.

The thin man grinned crookedly, as if he thought the whole thing was a joke. Perhaps he also took it as an insult, because it meant: You're not strong enough to support yourself. I glanced at him briefly, and he looked away. His gaze had become less sharp. Yesterday, knives; today, just dull metal.

Briggs dismissed us, and everything went on as if the sea had only yawned briefly. Work. Scrubbing. Sails. Curses. You get used to everything. That is the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of humankind.

I was assigned to work at the front, right where it happened. That wasn't a coincidence. Briggs loved that sort of thing. He'd send you where it hurts, so you'd learn that pain doesn't matter. Or so he could see if you'd weaken. Weakness is to him what blood is to sharks.

I knelt at the bow, scrubbing salt crusts from the planks, and with every stroke I thought of the splash. That small, wet sound, not even loud enough to produce a proper echo. The thought got on my nerves. Not the death itself. The way it had happened. So cheap. So casual. As if the sea had said: Oh, I'll take him too.

Tom came by eventually, watched me, and said nothing. He leaned against the railing and stared down, as if checking to see if the man was coming back up just to annoy us. Then he said, "Do you see something?"

"Just water," I said.

"Look more closely."

I leaned forward. The water was dark, but not empty. It's never empty. It lives, it works, it consumes, it excretes what it doesn't need. Sometimes small things floated by: wood chips, seaweed, foam. And then I saw it: a piece of fabric. A scrap, probably from a sleeve, torn from something. It was turning slowly, as if it were dancing.

"There," I said.

Tom nodded. "That's all that's left of some people. A scrap." He spat, as if it were a ceremony. "And yet they act like they're important."

"Aren't they?" I asked.

Tom looked at me. "Important for whom? For their mothers? For God? For the flies? The only thing that matters is what you can hold onto. Everything else is just talk."

That sounded harsh, but it was also honest. And being honest is often harsh, because being soft costs money you don't have.

At midday there was food. Thin, like lame excuses. A little bread, a little salted meat that tasted of past lives. The men ate faster than usual. That always happened after such an incident. As if they had to prove they were still there by stuffing something down. Eating is the primitive oath: I'm still alive.

Briggs stood there as if he were a priest at Holy Communion. He observed who took how much, who chewed slowly, who swallowed hastily. He paid attention to everything because control was his only substitute for trust.

A young guy, new on board, about my age but less dirty-looking, stared at his cup for a long time, as if afraid it would tip over. He asked quietly, "What if the sea takes someone who isn't drunk?"

Silence fell. Not shocked. More annoyed. Such a question sounds like an insult because it touches on the truth.

Briggs didn't answer. Tom didn't answer either. Harkness looked up and simply said, "Then it was his turn."

The boy swallowed. "But—"

"No buts," said Harkness. "The sea doesn't argue."

The boy looked like he'd just been told that the world has no mother. Some people take longer to grasp that. I'd already learned it at the harbor, with cold hands.

Later, a gust of wind came, and for a moment the ship sounded like a living animal again. The ropes sang, the planks creaked, and I felt that nervous energy that always arises when men inwardly try to tear themselves away from thoughts they can't digest.

In the evening there was rum. Not officially, of course. Officially there was only water and orders. But rum finds its way like rats. I smelled it, I saw the bottled hands, I heard the giggling. And I noticed how the men clung to the stuff as if it were a railing in a storm.

Briggs allowed it. Not because he was nice. Because rum loosens the tongue, and loose tongues betray things. He didn't need spies. He just needed patience and alcohol.

I sat off to the side, my back against a crate, and listened. Not because I felt morally superior. But because I still remembered the taste of rum in my throat, and I knew how quickly a sip can turn into stupidity, and how quickly stupidity into a splash.

One man said the man overboard used to own a fishing boat. Another claimed he was fleeing from a noose. A third said he was there because of a woman. Everyone concocted a story to make death seem meaningful. Meaning is what people create for themselves when they realize there's no one there to give it to them.

The thin man was loud. Too loud. He boasted, he laughed, he acted as if he were untouchable. That was his way of giving the sea the middle finger. The sea doesn't see fingers. It only sees bodies.

Tom didn't drink much, but he was there. He was observing. He spoke to the man with the leather hands. Briefly. Closely. And I knew: The conversation from last night hadn't ended. It had only changed its mask.

Briggs eventually walked through the group, picked up a cup, took a tiny sip as if tasting a poison that was already his. Then he stopped next to me.

"You don't drink," he said.

"I drank enough yesterday for a lifetime," I said.

He looked at me as if it were an unexpected answer. That rarely happened with him. "Clever," he finally said, and the word sounded like a curse coming from him.

"No," I said. "Just suspicious."

He nodded slowly. "Distrust keeps you alive." Then he leaned a little closer. "But distrust also makes you alone."

I felt the back of my neck grow warm. Not because it was touching. But because it was dangerous. Briggs never talked like that without a reason. He wanted to plant something in my head. An idea. Or a shackle.

I said, "Being alone is better than being wrong."

He grinned thinly. "That's what you say."

Then he moved on. He left me sitting there with that sentence, as if he had handed me a hollow coin.

The night was still again. Too still. Later, I stood at the railing and stared into the water. Not a splash today. No man falling. Only the black breathing of the sea. The gentle chewing of the waves against the hull, as if testing whether the wood was soft enough.

I thought of the scrap of fabric that had drifted by that morning. Perhaps that was all that remained of him. Perhaps a shoe would surface tomorrow. Or a hat. Or nothing. The sea is selective. Sometimes it gives you something back, just so you don't forget that it's watching you.

And I realized: I used to think the worst way to die was if someone killed you. Knife, bullet, noose. At least there's a face. At least there's a reason. At sea, sometimes you die because you

slipped. Because you were tired. Because the wind was a second stronger. Because the sea was simply hungry.

The sea devours silently, yes. And that's precisely why I was listening more closely now. Not just to sounds. To people. To pauses. To glances. Because I understood: If the sea doesn't take you, then maybe one of these things here will. And they won't even be as honest as a splash.

Nothing happened the following night. And that's exactly what made me nervous.

Nothing at sea is never truly "nothing." Nothing is just another word for: something's waiting. The wind lay lazily on the sails, as if it had a hangover. The water was smooth, but not peaceful. More like the surface of oil, pretending it can't catch fire.

The men slept badly. Not because they were thinking about the guy who had fallen overboard. But because death had given them an idea. An idea can be worse than a storm. A storm is honest. An idea works in your head until it either consumes you or it consumes you.

I was standing at the bow again. Not because I had to, but because I couldn't do otherwise. The wood beneath my feet was cold, damp, and alive, as if it had its own thoughts. It creaked with every slight movement. The ship whispered. The sea whispered back. Two old liars telling each other stories, while we stood between them, hoping neither of them would use us as the punchline.

Tom came over to me eventually. He didn't say anything, just stood next to me, like a shadow with teeth. We both stared into the darkness, and after a while he said, "You're looking like you're searching for something."

"Maybe I'll look," I said.

"What?"

I shrugged. "A sign. A reason. Something that explains why you don't just jump ship."

Tom laughed softly. "You're dumber than I thought."

"How come?"

"Because you think there are reasons," he said. "There is only hunger. And habit. And what you tell yourself to get up in the morning."

I looked at him. His face was just a hard outline in the dim light. "And you? What are you telling yourself?"

He spat over the railing. "That I'm not finished yet."

"With what?"

"With everything," he said. And there it was again, that crooked grin that never warms up. "With people. With life. With me."

I remained silent. Not because I couldn't think of anything to say. But because I suddenly realized that Tom wasn't just looking at Briggs as if he were a problem. Tom looked at everything that way. At the sea. At the men. At himself. As if everything were a bill that would eventually have to be paid. And sometimes it's paid in blood, because there's nothing else left.

A gust of wind came, short, sharp, as if the sea had briefly cleared its throat. The ship moved differently, a slight jerk. A man who had been sleeping at the stern, leaning against the rope, rolled to the side, half asleep, and cursed. That was it. A tiny moment. But I noticed how Tom immediately became more alert. His hand automatically went to his belt. Not to his weapon, more to reassure himself: I'm still here. I'm still whole.

"You see," he said. "That's how it eats. Just a small bite at first."

He walked away, leaving me standing there.

Later that night, I heard that faint scraping again. Not at the bow this time. Below deck. A sound that didn't belong to the ship. I knew the sounds of the ship by now. If you're on board long enough, you can hear whether a rope is just squeaking or whether it's about to snap. This sound was different. Human.

I went downstairs. Slowly, the steps creaked, and I stepped carefully, keeping my weight under control. Below deck, it smelled of damp wood and of men who had lived in their own clothes for too long. A smell that settles in your lungs and lingers like a bad thought.

Something moved between the barrels. The Thin One. Of course, the Thin One. He had a lantern, which he half-covered, and in his other hand something metallic. A small knife. Not a real one. More like the kind you use to cut rope or bread. Or throats, if you're feeling creative.

He noticed me too late. The lantern flickered, his gaze flickered faster.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He blinked. "Nothing."

"Nothing involving a knife," I said. "Sounds plausible."

He took a step back, stood with his feet wider apart, as if width could make him brave. "You shouldn't be here."

"I am where I am," I said. "That's the good thing about standing still."

He growled. "You're snooping around everywhere."

"I'm breathing," I said. "Sometimes something comes out with it."

His eyes briefly flickered past me, as if he were hoping someone else would come. Nobody came. Below deck, it's like in your head: if you mess up down here, you're usually on your own.

"Briggs is watching you," he said.

"Briggs keeps an eye on everyone," I said. "He watches so much because he has nothing else to do."

The thin man snorted. "You're a big talker."

"And you are small in your thinking."

That affected him. You could see it. Not because I was so clever, but because he himself knew how little was inside him when the rum didn't fill everything.

He raised the knife slightly. Not threateningly enough to call it an open threat, but enough that I couldn't ignore it. That was the game: just enough danger to make you shrink. I didn't shrink.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He swallowed. "I want you to shut up."

"About what?"

He smiled crookedly. "You know."

I nodded slowly. "And if not?"

His hand twitched. Not forward, more of a nervous twitch, as if his body already knew he had gone too far before his mind admitted it.

"Then something will happen to you," he said.

I stepped closer. Slowly. No rushing. Rushing breeds panic, and panic is for people who think they still have something to lose.

"Do you know what the sea does?" I said softly. "It eats quietly. It doesn't make a fuss. It simply takes. That's exactly how men take, when they dare. Not with grand pronouncements, not with bravado. But with steady hands."

He stared at me.

I pointed at his knife. "Your hands aren't steady."

His breathing quickened. "You just want trouble."

I shook my head. "I don't want any trouble. Trouble will find me anyway. I just want you to understand: if you stab me now, then you're not strong. Then you're just stupid. And stupidity costs more down here than up here. Down here, nobody shouts."

He stood there for a moment, frozen in place. Then he lowered the knife slightly. Not because I had convinced him, but because he suddenly realized I wasn't afraid of him. And fear is his only tool. If you take that away, there's not much left.

"Tom likes you," he murmured.

"Tom doesn't like anyone," I said. "He only tolerates me."

"Then... then don't make it worse," he said. His voice was suddenly less venomous. More like a plea he hated because it smacked of weakness.

"Don't make it worse," I said.

He wanted to say something more, but then we heard footsteps upstairs. Slow. Heavy. Briggs. Of course, Briggs. The man smelled trouble like a dog that lives on trouble.

The thin man flinched, put the knife away, and set down the lantern as if he had just happened to be there. His whole pose screamed: I am innocent. And I thought: That's how most people look just before they lie.

Briggs came down the stairs. His gaze fell first on me. Then on the thin man. Then on the lamppost. He said nothing. Silence was his weapon of choice.

"What is it?" he finally asked.

"Guard," I said.

The thin man nodded too quickly. "Yes. Guard. I... I was just checking."

Briggs stepped closer, stopping precisely between us as if he were a wall. He smelled of cold air and control.

"You two," he said calmly, "are like rats in a sack. And I am the sack."

Nobody laughed. Not even Tom, if he had been there.

Briggs looked at me. "You want to live. I can see that." Then he looked at the thin man. "And you want to live too, but you're too stupid to admit it."

The thin man swallowed. His face went pale.

"Listen," said Briggs. "If you're going to eat each other alive, do it outside. Not below deck. Below deck, I want peace and quiet. Because if there's a fire down here, we'll all die."

He held my gaze for another moment, then turned and went back upstairs as if it were over. As if we were two children he'd just caught stealing. But I'd seen something in his eyes, briefly, very briefly: He knew things were brewing. And he wasn't afraid. He only had plans.

The thin man waited until Briggs was gone. Then he looked at me, and in his gaze was hatred and something even worse: shame.

"You've exposed me," he whispered.

"You've exposed yourself," I said.

He gritted his teeth. "I won't forget this."

"Just forget about it," I said. "But remember something else: The sea eats silently. So do men. If you're going to be a predator, at least learn how to do it properly."

I left him standing there and went back on deck. The air was cold and clear. Above us were stars, a few of them as if they had decided to watch for a moment. The sea lay black, calm, greedy, patient.

I stood at the railing and spat. Not out of disgust. Out of habit. Out of defiance. Perhaps also to tell the sea: Not today.

But I knew: It's not about "today." It's never about "today." It's about the moment when you're tired. When you think you're safe. When you think you can afford a second of inattention.

The sea is waiting for this moment. And so are the men on board.

I saw my hands in the starlight, rough, torn, already covered in small scars. A boy's hands, they might say. I saw only tools. And tools learn. Quickly. Often the hard way.

The wind swept across the deck, and somewhere wood creaked like a quiet, cruel joke. I thought of the man who had gone overboard and how quickly he'd disappeared. It can happen so fast. One wrong sip. One wrong step. The wrong knife at the wrong moment.

I inhaled. Salt. Always salt.

And I knew: If the sea doesn't take you, one of them will. And eventually, you won't just stand by and watch anymore. Eventually, you'll have to act. Not loudly. Not heroically. But calmly. As calmly as the water when it's consuming.

My hands learned to kill.

My hands were initially only for carrying things. Sacks, buckets, ropes that would tear your skin open until you looked like you'd been fighting a grumpy cat with a god complex. Hands are dumb at first. They do what you tell them. They bleed when you abuse them. They tremble when you're cold. They hold on when you fall.

And then, at some point, they begin to learn.

Not the kind of neat, polished learning that happens when some pampered, spoiled brat opens a book and then feels smart. No. My hands learned because it was necessary. Because the world doesn't explain anything. It just hits you, and when you're down, it says: Well? Did you get it now?

The day my hands began to understand killing wasn't a day I woke up thinking, "Today I'm going to be a killer." Only fools and preachers think like that. It was a day like any other. Wind, work, hunger, men glaring at each other. The only difference was: this time, someone wanted me gone.

The skinny guy hadn't forgotten the night below deck. Those types never forget. They have nothing else to hold onto. During the day, he acted friendly, too friendly, a fake friendliness that tastes of metal. He even helped me with a rope once, and I knew immediately: this would cost me later.

I didn't say anything to Tom. Not because I was stupid. But because I'd already realized that on a ship, you only have a few people who truly have your back. And even they don't do it out of love. They do it because it benefits them if you're alive. Tom would help me if I remained useful. So I had to remain useful. And alive.

In the afternoon, Briggs sent me down to fetch water. Water. That ridiculous gold everyone needs and no one respects until it's gone. Below deck, it was warm and smelly, and the barrels stood there like a line of silent judges. I walked among them, my hand on the wood, because it's easy to lose your balance down here, and balance at sea is as important as teeth.

I heard nothing. No footsteps. No whispers. Only the ship's breathing. And yet I knew I wasn't alone. Sometimes you sense it, like a fly on your skin before you see it.

Then came the blow.

Not in the face. In the back. Hard, deliberate. Air out. I slammed into a barrel, heard wood creak, felt pain like hot nails. I turned and saw the skinny guy. Of course. He wasn't holding a knife this time. He was holding something better: surprise. And in his other hand, he had a piece of rope, tied into a loop. A makeshift rope. That's the kind of creativity I hate in people.

"You should sniff less," he said, and his voice trembled with joy.

I tried to laugh, but all that came out was a gasp. "You should drink less."

He grinned, and his grin was ugly. "Only one person is drinking today. The sea."

He came closer, the loop in his hand. He wanted to throw it over my head, dress me up, silence me. Like the sea. Feed silently. He had been listening. He wasn't clever, but he was a quick learner when it came to cruelty.

I kicked at him, hitting him in the shin. He cursed, but he didn't drop the loop. He punched me in the side, where my ribs were already bruised. I felt stars, but there weren't any in the sky. And in that moment, I realized: This isn't a scuffle. This isn't like back at the harbor, where you run and laugh and steal again tomorrow. This only ends one way. Either him or me.

The strange thing was: I didn't panic. I gained clarity. Everything inside me went still, as if someone had poured the rum out of my head. The sounds became sharper. The dripping somewhere. The creaking of the wood. His breathing, faster, more greedy. My own breath, hard and short.

He was stronger than me, a little. Not much. But enough when you're down. And I was down for a moment. The barrel had thrown me off my rhythm. He lunged at me, rammed me, and the loop grazed my neck. Just a moment. But that moment is enough to understand how quickly air becomes nothing.

My hands instinctively reached out. Not for his throat. Not for his knife, because he didn't have one. They reached for the rope. They gripped it, ripped it, pulled it away, so tightly my hands burned. And suddenly, I had it in my hand. Not him.

That's when things changed.

He saw it too. His gaze changed, that tiny shift from perpetrator to human being. From certain to uncertain. And I thought: Too late. Too damn late.

He grabbed the rope, wanting it back. We both tugged at it, like two dogs at a bone. Then he kicked me in the stomach, and I went down for a moment. And when I came back up, the rope was already halfway around my neck again.

I don't know where the strength came from. Maybe from hunger. Maybe from pride. Maybe from pure hatred at the idea of dying down here like a piece of dirt, without anyone up above even noticing I existed.

I pulled him close to me.

And my hands found something hard on the belt of a barrel. A hook, a piece of metal, some damned thing just hanging there because ships are full of things that can kill you if you give them the chance. My fingers closed around it like a coin. Like an answer.

I struck.

Not elegant. Not like in stories. I smashed the metal against his head, right above his ear. It made a sound I'll never forget. Not loud. More of a dull clack, like hitting a wet pumpkin.

The thin man stared at me as if I'd just explained to him that the world has no rules. Then he slumped down. Not dead immediately. Just gone. Unconscious or semi-conscious. His body made that heavy, stupid sound when flesh hits wood.

I stood there, still holding the piece of metal in my hand, my fingers so tightly closed around it that I couldn't open them for a moment. As if my hands had decided: This is ours now. We're not letting go.

The rope lay beside him. The loop was open. A ridiculous circle that had just been meant to be my end. I breathed heavily. My throat burned. My side burned. Everything burned.

And then he moved.

He groaned, gagged, opened his eyes wide, confused, angry. And I saw immediately: He will get up again. He will try again. And the second time he will be wiser. The second time he won't speak.

So there I stood, in that stinking belly of the ship, and the choice was suddenly as clear as a knife: Either you end it, or it ends you.

My hands did it before my head could come up with a nice sentence to go with it.

I knelt beside him, grabbed his shirt, pulled him up, and his gaze sharpened for a second. He recognized me. He recognized what was coming. There was fear. Finally. That made him human. And the moment when one dies most easily is the most human.

"Please," he managed to say, quietly, terribly. The word sounded wrong in his mouth, as if he had never practiced it.

I wanted to laugh. Not out of joy. Out of that bitter humor you have when you realize that all people are the same, just before they die. Big mouth, small soul.

"Please is a word for doors," I said. "Not for this."

I pressed the rope back around his neck, not frantically and greedily as he would have done it. I did it calmly. I pulled. Slowly. Firmly. I felt his hands on my arms, the scratching, the tugging. He wheezed. He kicked. He grew weaker. And my hands held on, as if gripping a leash that must restrain an animal.

It happened faster than I thought. That was the worst part. Not the struggle. Not the gasping. But how quickly a man can become a thing. How quickly everything that made him so important before just disappears.

When it was over, I sat there and stared at his eyes. They were open, but empty. Not dramatic. Not angry. Just gone. As if someone had turned off the light and forgotten to close the curtain.

My hands were trembling. Not much. Just a slight tremor, as if they were surprised they were still attached to me. Then I wiped them on his pants. Not out of disrespect. Out of pragmatism. Blood sticks.

And then, for just a moment, I thought: So that's what it's like. That's killing. No thunder. No music. Just pressure. Just time. Just hands.

The sea devours silently. So do I, apparently.

I sat there for another moment, as if my body were waiting for some applause that never came. No angel, no devil, no damned choir. Just the creaking ship and that smell of wet wood, sweat, and that sweetish something that people leave behind when they suddenly cease to be human.

My hands rested on my knees. Calmly. Almost insultingly calm. As if they had just tightened a rope, not a life. That made me furious. I wanted to tremble, scream, vomit, do anything to prove to myself that I was still normal. But normal was never my thing. And I'd already released enough vomit into the sea; the ocean won't be fed on it.

I stood up, slowly, because my back ached and my throat burned. The dew still lay there like a joke no one tells. The thin man lay crooked between the barrels, his head at an angle that didn't suit a person. His eyes were open, as if he still wanted to stare, but there was nothing left in them. No poison, no envy, no cheap bravery. Just glass.

And then came the thought that always visits you in such a moment: Shit. Now you have to do something.

Murder isn't the worst part. The worst part is what comes after. The aftermath is the real work. The aftermath is what stories always leave out because it's unsexy. Nobody wants to hear about you sweating, wondering how you're going to keep breathing without your life jumping out at you.

Below deck, it was more cramped than I'd ever known. Suddenly, every shadow was a witness. Every crate a judge. Every drop of water a sound too loud. I listened. Footsteps above? Voices? Some kind of curse? Nothing. Only the ship's slow breathing. It was as if it had briefly choked and was now pretending everything was normal.

I knelt down again, not out of respect, but because I needed to check if he was really gone. And there was this ridiculous, stupid second where I hoped he'd move, just so I wouldn't be the guy who did this. But he didn't move. He was done.

"You wanted to be quiet," I murmured, my voice sounding strange, as if someone else were speaking through my mouth. "Now you're quiet."

I touched him by the shirt, and only then did I realize how heavy a body is when it no longer helps. Dead people are bad partners. They don't carry their share. They're just weight you've brought upon yourself. I pulled him a little, and his boots scraped against the wood. The sound made my teeth ache.

I'm not going to tell you how to do something like this "right," because there is no right way. There's only: fast enough that you don't get caught, and stupid enough that you do it at all. I did what I had to do so the day could go on. Not pretty, not clean, just somehow. I pushed him out of sight, to where shadows reside anyway. I wiped away what could be wiped away and cursed quietly at the world, at him, at myself, at this damned confinement that forces you to make decisions while you can barely breathe.

And as I did that, I realized I wasn't thinking about him. Not his face, not his sayings, not even his last-minute fear. I was thinking about Briggs. About Tom. About the crew. About the rules no one speaks but everyone knows. That tells you everything about yourself. You kill a man and the first thing you think about is the hierarchy. Welcome to real life, kid.

When I came back up, the cold air hit me like a punishment I was grateful for. On deck, it was the usual scene: ropes, curses, a few men pretending they still had dreams, and a few who had long since settled into routine. No one shouted. No alarm. No "Man missing!" That was the next thing that hit me: how little you notice when someone is missing. How insignificant one body can be when enough other bodies are still pulling.

Tom stood by the mast, working as if he were married to the wood. He saw me, just for a moment. His gaze lingered on my neck, where the red mark was, where the rope had kissed me. Then his eyes slid to my hands, as if checking for blood. Or guilt. Or both.

He said nothing. But his face made that tiny movement that men make when they understand something without saying it aloud.

Later, when we were alone, behind a stack of boxes where the wind doesn't steal everything, he came to me.

"You're stressed," he said.

"I have a job," I said.

"Work smells different," he said.

I wanted to lie to his face. Not because I hated him. Because lies are sometimes like clothes: you put them on so you don't get cold. But I realized it was pointless with Tom. The man had eyes that had seen too much. You could tell him things, sure. But you couldn't sell him anything.

"He was downstairs," I said.

Tom nodded. No surprise there. "So?"

I looked him straight in the face. "And he's not up there anymore."

Tom snorted softly, as if he had expected exactly that, as if it were written in a calendar. "He tried."

"Yes."

"With dew?"

I shrugged. "He wanted to be quiet."

Tom grinned briefly, coldly. "Quiet is always dangerous. Loud you can see."

I was waiting for moralizing. For some kind of pronouncement about sin, about guilt, about how you shouldn't do that. Tom didn't give me any. He only gave me reality.

"Is it clean?" he asked.

"As clean as it can be here," I said.

"Good," said Tom. "Then listen. No one is mourning him. But a few will ask where he is. Not because they like him. Because they count. Men always count when they get scared."

"And what do I say?"

Tom shrugged. "Say he was stupid. That's rarely a lie."

I stared at him. "You're covering for me?"

He laughed briefly, without humor. "I'm not covering for you. I'm covering for myself. If they eat you, they'll eat the person standing next to you next. And I'm often standing next to you, kid."

"I am not your friend," I said.

"Friends are found on land," said Tom. "Here, there's only order."

He tapped me on the shoulder once, not in a friendly way, more like marking me, and left.

I stopped and noticed my heart was beating faster, only now. As if my body was only now being given permission to react. Before, everything had been purely functional. Now came the trembling. Not in my hands. In my chest. A short, nasty fluttering, as if something inside me was laughing and crying at the same time.

That evening, Briggs showed up. Of course. Briggs always shows up when you're hoping he'll leave you alone. He came slowly across the deck, his eyes like a broom picking out dirt. He stopped in front of me, and I suddenly realized how dry my mouth was. Salt, yes. But also something else: that feeling that someone's about to pull on you like a rope.

"You have a welt on your neck," said Briggs.

"Dew," I said.

"The dew doesn't kiss you like that," he said.

I remained silent. Silence is sometimes the only answer that doesn't immediately reek of a lie.

Briggs studied me for a long time. He didn't just see my neck. He saw everything. Hands. Eyes. Posture. He sensed something had happened, but he wanted to decide whether it was a problem or an advantage for him. That's Briggs. He thinks in terms of benefit. Always.

"Listen," he said quietly. "No one dies in vain on my ship."

I swallowed. "I don't give anyone away for free—"

He raised a hand. "Save your words. Words are cheap. Dead people are expensive." He took a step closer. "If one person is missing, there's no work. If there's no work, the others get nervous. Nervous men make mistakes. Mistakes cost ships."

He paused, just long enough for my stomach to clench.

Then he said: "So: You're working double tomorrow. You keep your mouth shut. And if anyone asks, you say he's fallen."

"Fallen?"

"Yes," said Briggs. "The sea eats silently. And people like to fall. That fits."

I stared at him, and something inside me grew cold. Not because he knew. But because he accepted it. Because he even incorporated it into his system, as if it were a number in a book.

"And what if they ask who saw it?" I asked.

Briggs grinned thinly. "Then you say: no one. Because everyone's blind at night, when it's convenient."

He turned and left as if the conversation had been a weather report. I stood and listened to his footsteps on the planks, that dry clacking sound, as if he were tapping out the world.

That's when I understood: killing isn't just about hands. Killing is also what comes after. The lie that clings to it like a bandage. The order that pretends blood is just a stain you can scrub away. And now I was part of it. Not out of pride. Out of necessity.

I went to the railing, stared into the water, and took a deep breath. Salt. Always salt. It was like mockery. As if the sea were saying: You're one of us now. You'll take what you get.

My hands hung on the railing, and I noticed they felt different. Heavier. More secure. As if they had learned a new language, one that doesn't require words. One that knows only pressure and the end.

And somewhere inside me was that nasty little sense of humor you only have when you've already gone too far: The first rum was a mistake. This was a decision. And decisions stick to you like tar.

The next day I worked double shifts, just like Briggs had said. Not because he ordered it, but because my body needed something to hold onto. When you stand still, thoughts come. And thoughts on a ship are like open flames: eventually, everything you've managed to patch up burns away.

I scrubbed until my arms went numb. I pulled ropes until my fingers tore again. I hauled water as if I wanted to drink the sea dry, just to prove to it that it couldn't have it all. Nobody said anything. Nobody asked about the Thin One. Not aloud. But I felt it anyway: that little counting in their eyes as they walked across the deck. One less. Somewhere, someone's missing. It's like with rats: you don't notice which one's missing, you just notice the brief silence.

That afternoon, Harkness stood beside me while I mended a sail. He looked at my hands, not the sail. My hands were red, not from blood, but from work. Blood can be washed off. Work stays on the skin, like a second inscription.

"You are different," he said.

I laughed briefly. "New, you mean."

He slowly shook his head. "New is soft. Different is..." He searched briefly for the word, as if it were buried somewhere in an old sack. "...heavy."

"I'm just tired," I said.

"Tiredness makes you soft," said Harkness. "Heavyness makes you silent."

I looked at him. "What do you want to tell me?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. I don't like to talk." Then he walked away, as if he had just thrown me a coin that I could spend later.

Tom showed up in the evening. Not directly at my side, more like I saw him out of the corner of my eye. He was standing by the barrels, talking to the man with the leather hands, their heads close together, like people chewing over secrets. Then he came over to me, as if he were just passing by.

"He wasn't up there today," said Tom.

"Many people weren't up there today," I said.

Tom grinned. "You're getting better at talking around things."

"And you'll get better at listening," I said.

He nodded almost imperceptibly. "So Briggs swallowed it."

"Briggs will swallow anything as long as it benefits him," I said.

Tom leaned against the railing and spat. "And the others?"

"The others want stories," I said. "They'll get some."

Tom looked at me sideways. "You're cold."

"No," I said. "I'm practical."

"Practical is just another word for cold," he said.

I wanted to object, but I couldn't think of anything that wasn't a lie. So I remained silent. Silence is a good cloak when you don't want anyone to see your inner self. And my inner self was a damn slaughterhouse.

The moment I had been expecting came during the night. Not as a bang. More like a skewed question.

One of the men, Keene, the one with the manners, came over to me when I was alone. He smelled of rum, but not so much that he'd become stupid. That made him more dangerous. He stood there, smiling politely, as if we were at a ball and not on a floating scumbag.

"Have you seen the thin one today?" he asked.

I kept my gaze steady. "Which thin one? There are many thin ones here."

He continued to smile. "You know who I mean. The one with the big mouth and little courage."

I shrugged. "Maybe he fell."

Keene nodded, as if he had expected it. "I liked it. Yes. The sea is hungry today."

"The sea is always hungry," I said.

He took a step closer. "And you? Were you hungry today too?"

That was a neat little trap. No direct accusation, just a barb. I smiled, as politely as I could, which probably looked like a dog baring its teeth.

"I'll eat if there's something," I said.

Keene studied me, searching for something in my face. Regret, perhaps. Fear. A tremor. Anything to feed him. He found nothing, or at least he pretended not to.

"You know," he said, "on a ship, men disappear. Sometimes into the sea. Sometimes into other men."

I spat over the railing. "Then you should watch where you're standing."

Keene laughed softly. "You can certainly threaten."

"I'm not threatening," I said. "I'm describing."

His smile faded briefly, then he withdrew, like a wave that realizes the rock won't budge. "Good night," he said, and left.

I was still standing there, and only then did I realize how exhausting it had been. Not physically. Internally. That's what nobody tells you: killing doesn't just take strength. It takes composure. Afterward, you have to endure every stare, every question, every smile that lingers a little too long. And you have to pretend everything's normal, while knowing that something inside you has shifted.

I went below deck briefly later, alone, just to see if anything was wrong. If anyone down there had smelled anything. The place where it had happened looked the same as always: dirty, damp, neglected. The ship was a good accomplice. It swallows everything, like the sea. Maybe that's why ships are so cursed: they're just little seas made of wood.

When I came back up, the sky was clearer, and the wind was stronger. It whipped across the deck, playing with the ropes as if it were drunk. I stood there, letting the wind hit my face, and suddenly I had to laugh. Not because it was funny, but because it's the only way not to go crazy.

What a damn joke: I'd spent my whole life learning how not to get eaten, and now I'd eaten someone. Not metaphorically. Not pretty. Plainly, with dew and pressure and time. And the worst part was: the world hadn't even flinched. No lightning bolt. No divine finger-wagging. Not even a proper punishment. Just work the next day. Just Keene with his polite venom. Just Briggs, sorting it all into his system like one more barrel or two.

I stared at my hands. They looked like hands. That's a joke, too. From the outside, everything's normal. Inside, a new room has been unlocked, and you don't know if you'll ever be able to lock it again.

I thought about that moment when I drew my hand. Calmly. Firmly. Not like a boy panicking, but like a man who had already decided. The part that frightened me most wasn't the violence. It was the calmness. That cold, clean calm where you no longer ask if you're allowed to. You just do it.

I wondered if it had always been inside me. Or if the ship had scraped it out of me like salt from a wound. Maybe it was both. Maybe you won't become a monster. Maybe you just realize that you can be one when it matters.

Tom came by again later, stood next to me, and also looked at the water. He said, "You'll have to live with it."

"Maybe," I said.

"You will have to," he said.

I nodded slowly. "And you?"

He laughed briefly. "I have so much crap in my head, I hardly notice what's new anymore."

"That's sad," I said.

"That's handy," said Tom, grinning. "See? Handy."

He left, and I stayed at the railing, letting the night flow into me like water into a hole.

You know what's funny? I used to think strength was not killing anyone. Being better. Civilized. Such crap, the kind people say who've never actually been backed into a corner. Strength isn't about staying clean. Strength is about getting dirty and still moving forward without completely losing yourself. And I wasn't sure if I'd just lost myself or found myself.

The sea murmured softly. It almost sounded like applause, if you fancied it. I licked my lips. Salt. Always salt. And somewhere deep inside, I felt something rise up, legs wide apart, with a grin that boded ill.

My hands had learned.

And I had the feeling that this was just the beginning.

A flag doesn't need faith.

At sea, you quickly learn that people can believe in anything that keeps their ass warm. In God. In luck. In the Virgin Mary, in the devil, in some star up there that supposedly sorts your fate with tweezers. I've seen men cross themselves before hoisting a sail, as if a piece of cloth on the mast smells more heavenly if you look pious enough beforehand. And I've seen those same men later, pissing themselves if the wind shifted for even a moment. Faith is often just fear with a pretty name.

A flag, on the other hand, is honest. It's not a prayer. It's a sign that says: We're coming to hurt you. Period. No discussion, no moralizing. A piece of cloth, yes, but it's astonishing how many men die because they misinterpret a piece of cloth. Or because they think a piece of cloth will save them. Spoiler alert: it won't. If you're unlucky, it'll be the last thing you see before someone slits your throat.

Our boat hung a flag as boring as a preacher at dinner. Nothing frightening. Nothing story-making. It basically just said: We're here, we're poor, we're tired, we're dangerous in the

boring way. A flag like that doesn't command respect. It makes you prey for people who think they're hunters.

Tom knew it. Briggs knew it. Everyone knew it. And yet the thing hung there because the captain—that invisible bastard who hid in his cabin like a king in a damp closet—preferred to keep a low profile. Low profile is a nice word for cowardly, if you pronounce it correctly.

After what had happened below deck, the men looked at me differently. Not openly. Not like a hero. More like a tool that had suddenly become sharp. Some avoided me because they didn't want to know if I could cut them too. Others sought my company because they believe sharp tools bring good luck. That's the kind of thinking that will later leave you floating dead in the water, but it's widespread.

One evening, when the air was sticky and the sky hung so low you wanted to bump into it, I stood by the flagpole and looked at the flag. It fluttered lazily in the wind, as if it too had had enough. I thought: This thing suits us. Sad, but true.

Tom stepped next to me. He also stared up. "Looks like a handkerchief," he said.

"So that the captain can wipe away his fear," I said.

Tom grinned briefly. "Or his tears."

"At least tears are honest," I said.

He spat. "Honesty brings no gold."

"It might cause trouble," I said.

"Trouble sometimes brings gold," said Tom, giving me a sideways glance. "You're starting to understand."

We stood there, two shadows on wet wood, and the wind played with the fabric as if mocking it. Then Tom said: "A flag is not decoration. A flag is a promise."

"To whom?" I asked.

Tom pointed his chin towards the sea. "To everyone. To you. To those you want to eat. To those who want to eat you. You tell the world what you are."

"And what if you don't know what you are?" I asked.

Tom laughed softly. "Then choose something. The main thing is that it scares the others."

That sounded simple, but at sea, simple is often the only thing that works. Too many decisions will kill you. So make one and move on.

Later that same evening, Briggs arrived. He acted as if he'd just dropped by, but Briggs never comes by chance. He comes when he smells something. And he smelled change. Change always stinks because it smells of risk.

"What are you staring at?" he asked.

Tom said: "On our shame."

Briggs growled. "Shame is expensive. And we're poor."

"That's exactly why," I said.

Briggs looked at me, and there was this calculating quality in his gaze, as if he were figuring out whether I was useful to him or whether I would become a problem. Maybe I was both. That happens more often than you'd think.

"Are you joining the conversation now, too?" he asked.

"I'm still breathing," I said. "So yes."

Tom grinned, but Briggs didn't. Briggs rarely grinned, and when he did, it was only when he was mentally hooking someone.

"A flag," Briggs said slowly, "is visibility. Visibility is trouble. And trouble costs lives."

"Trouble brings loot," said Tom.

Briggs snorted. "Prey brings ropes, too."

"You can find ropes everywhere," I said. "Even without loot."

That was perhaps too cheeky. Briggs' eyes narrowed briefly. But he didn't say anything immediately. He thought. That was the dangerous thing about him: he wasn't impulsive. He was like a vice. Slow. Deliberate.

"So you want us to change our name?" he asked.

"I want," said Tom, "that those who see us don't think: oh, they're easy to take."

Briggs looked up at the flag again, and I realized he understood. Not out of romanticism. Out of logic. Respect is a currency, and a flag is the exchange rate. If you look cheap, you'll be treated cheaply.

"The captain decides," Briggs finally said, and you could hear how sick he was of having to say it.

"The captain is asleep," said Tom. "At most, he decides which blanket to use."

Briggs gritted his teeth. "Watch out, Tom."

Tom shrugged. "I'm always careful. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here anymore."

Briggs left, but I saw him glance briefly at the cabin door. He was thinking. He was counting. He was planning. And I knew: if something were to happen to the flag, it wouldn't be because

we'd talked about it nicely. But because someone would do it. Quietly. Practically. Like the sea.

I had a bad dream last night. Not a nightmare with monsters, no demons. Just images of fabric fluttering in the wind, and below it, faces looking up. Some with fear, some with greed. And I woke up with the feeling that I want something bigger than me. Not love. Not peace. Influence. Something that remains even when you're gone. A name. A color. A sign.

In the morning the sky was clearer, the air crisp, and the men were grumpy because clarity means you can see yourself. And most people don't like seeing themselves.

Briggs had us line up. He spoke briefly. Work, rations, guard duty. The usual. Then he got to something he doesn't normally mention because it smacks of an idea.

"The flag," he said.

A few heads turned. Tom raised his eyebrows. I kept my face still. Something was thumping inside. Not fear. Anticipation.

"The captain doesn't want any changes," said Briggs.

A low murmur rippled through the men, not loud enough for rebellion, but loud enough for discontent. Discontent is like mold: you only see it when it's already everywhere.

Briggs raised a hand. "But." He let the word hang, as if it were a hook. "But... the captain isn't the one who counts who's still there at night. I am."

Silence.

Briggs looked around the room. "A flag doesn't need belief," he said. "It only needs effectiveness. And effectiveness is the only thing that protects us on this sea."

I almost laughed. Briggs, talking about protection like he was a father. But he was more like a butcher trying to keep his meat together so it wouldn't run away. But I understood. And I sensed the other men understood too. They wanted to be seen. They wanted to be feared. Not loved. Being loved is for dogs and children. We were neither.

Tom said, "So?"

Briggs' gaze met Tom's like a blow. "So," said Briggs, "if we're going to do it, we're going to do it right. And if we do it, there's no going back. Then we won't be the ones people overlook. Then we'll be the ones people look for."

"Good," I said, and I meant it.

Briggs looked at me. "You?"

"If they're going to look for us anyway," I said, "then at least they should be afraid when they find us."

A few men laughed, hard and short. Not a laugh of amusement. More like the kind of laugh that says: Yes. Exactly. Finally, someone's said it.

Briggs nodded slowly. "Then listen. There will be a sign. Not a pretty fabric. Not a color that smells of commerce. Something people will understand even if they're too stupid to read words."

Tom grinned broadly now. "A skull?"

Briggs spat. "An entire cemetery, for all I care. As long as they believe it."

I thought of the word "believe" and couldn't help but grin inwardly again. That was the thing: you don't have to convince anyone that you're a devil. You just have to look like one, and sometimes that's enough to make them kill themselves out of fear.

A flag doesn't need faith. It only needs eyes to see it. And hearts that suddenly beat faster.

As we parted ways, I stood by the mast for a moment and looked up. The old fabric was still flapping, but now it looked like a dead man who doesn't yet know he's dead. I placed my hand on the wood, felt the ship's vibration, that constant, subtle trembling, as if it were preparing for something.

I thought: If we make a statement, it will take root within us. Then there's no going back to "just working." Then you become something you've chosen for yourself. Or at least something you convince yourself you've become.

And I realized: I wanted this. Not because it's right. But because I was tired of being a shadow that gets kicked away. I wanted my shadow to have teeth.

The galley smelled of rancid grease and unspoken decisions. Briggs had tossed the word "sign" into the air like a bone, and ever since, the men had suddenly become alert in a way I didn't like. Alert doesn't mean wise. Alert simply means: now something will be done.

Tom sat down at the table, pulled a piece of chalk from some pocket as if he'd been carrying it around his whole life, and began to scribble on the wooden board. A skull, first just roughly, then more precisely. Empty eye sockets, a jaw like a grin. He drew bones next to it, crossed, as if life were a bad joke and the ending the punchline.

"Too ordinary," one said.

"Too pretty," said another.

"Too honest," said Tom, laughing softly. "As if honesty were our problem."

Briggs stood beside them, arms folded, looking as if he were checking an invoice. "What do we have?" he asked.

"Fabric," said a sailor. "In the cargo hold. Old scraps of sails."

"Sailcloth," Briggs growled. "It'll hold up."

"And color?" asked Tom.

Silence. Color is a luxury. Color is something that merchants possess, not men like us.

"Tar," someone said.

"Blood," said another, and a few laughed, but not in a friendly way.

I said, "Tar is better. Blood turns brown and stinks. Tar stays black and stinks too, but in a way that suits it."

Tom grinned at me. "The little guy has a sense of style."

"I have a sense of impact," I said. "Style is just a byproduct."

Briggs nodded slowly. "Effect. Exactly." He tapped his finger on Tom's chalky head. "This is a start. But I want it to be understood even in the fog. I want a captain who's half-blind and half-drunk to still know: This is trouble."

Tom put down the chalk and looked at me. "You've got a big mouth. What would you write on it?"

I thought of all the flags I had seen. Clean colors, pretty symbols that pretend to be worth more than the people beneath them. I thought of the harbor, of the men who pray before they die. I thought of the splash. The quiet eating. The thin one who had thought he could silence me. A symbol doesn't have to be beautiful. It only has to seem true.

"A body," I said.

A few heads turned towards me. One laughed uncertainly. "What?"

"A body," I repeated. "A man. Hanging. Or bleeding. Something that says: We're not just taking you. We're also going to finish you off. And we'll sleep well afterwards."

Tom stared at me, and I saw him hesitate for a moment, wondering whether to laugh or punch me. Then he laughed, dryly. "You're really sick."

"Everyone here is sick," I said. "I'm just no longer receiving treatment."

Briggs looked at me for a long time. Then he nodded once. "A sign doesn't have to be believable," he said. "It only has to feed the imagination. The imagination does the rest."

That was the point where I realized how deeply Briggs understood the world, without liking it. People aren't so much victims of knives. They're victims of images. You show them a picture, and they've already destroyed themselves internally before you even get on deck.

That same day, fabric was procured. Old scraps of sailcloth, tattered but strong. Men laid them on the ground as if they were a shroud, and somehow it felt right. Tom scribbled the design again, larger, and Briggs grumbled approvals or insults, depending on his mood.

The captain didn't come out. Of course not. He stayed in his cabin, probably in some bed out of cowardice, and acted as if he ruled the world. I would have liked to see him later, looking at his own flag and realizing that his ship no longer belonged to him. But that was the future. At sea, the future is always just a rumor.

We worked on the flag like it was a weapon. Silently, intently, with that dirty reverence men develop when building something bigger than their own bellies. There wasn't much talking. Talking softens things. And nobody here liked being soft.

Tar was heated until it was viscous. The smell was like a memory of the harbor: burning, sticky, full of grime. One held the lantern, another the cloth, Tom painted with a piece of wood as if it were a brush. The skull took on contours, then eyes, then a mouth that looked like a grin. And underneath, they painted a body, not pretty, more like a stick figure from hell: arms outstretched as if still protesting, but already knowing that protesting is pointless.

"He looks like an idiot," one person said.

"Everyone looks like that when they die," I said.

Some laughed, some remained silent. Silence was the more honest reaction.

When the thing was finished, we set it aside to let the tar dry. It gleamed in the lantern light like fresh sin. And suddenly there was this feeling: Now there's no going back. Before, we were just poor bastards on a ship. Now we were a promise.

That night I heard the men talking about it, more quietly, as if about something you don't touch because it might bite back. One said, "If we hoist that, we're done for if they catch us." Another said, "If we don't hoist it, we're done for before we even get anything." They were both right. That's the beauty of truth: it can fuck you up from two sides at once.

The next morning, a sail appeared on the horizon. Small at first, then larger. A merchant ship, sluggish, heavy, full of things we could never have afforded. You can recognize such ships by the way they move: cautiously, neatly, as if hoping the sea will like them if they just swim nicely enough.

Briggs shouted orders, and everything happened quickly. Ropes were tightened, men ran, wood creaked. The captain finally came out, pale, impeccably groomed, a figure who might have impressed someone on land. At sea, such a face impresses only the seagulls.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as if he had just fallen out of a dream.

"Prey," said Briggs.

The captain blinked, saw the merchant ship, and I saw that moment in him: greed versus fear. Greed often wins, but fear negotiates the price.

"We will remain inconspicuous," the captain said immediately.

Tom stood behind Briggs, grinning. I felt the air thicken. "Inconspicuous," that damned phrase. Inconspicuous means: We pretend to be harmless until we're close enough to strike.

Sometimes it works. But not always. And most importantly: It diminishes you. It makes you a trickster, not a legend.

Briggs said calmly, "The flag."

The captain turned to him. "Which flag?"

Briggs nodded to a sailor. The sailor disappeared briefly and returned with the new fabric, rolled up. The captain stared at it as if someone had just put a snake in his bed.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

Tom said: "A flag that works."

The captain turned red. "You have no right—"

"Right?" Tom laughed. "At sea there are only ropes and knives. Find one."

Briggs raised a hand, stopping the verbal exchange before it turned bloody. "Captain," he said, and the very way he uttered the word made it an insult, "we're too close to be having discussions now. We hoist the thing. Or we let the loot go."

The captain stared at the merchant ship. You could see his mind doing the math. Prey. Risk. Noose. Prey. Risk. Noose. And then he did what cowardly men do when they realize they're losing: he gave in and pretended it was his idea.

"Fine," he finally said. "But... but only if they refuse."

Tom grinned broadly. "They will refuse. Briefly. And then not anymore."

The sailor on the mast hesitated for a moment, as if unsure whether he was signing his own death warrant. Then he pulled. The new fabric rolled up, the tar glistened, the skull grinned at the world, and beneath it lay the body, looking like a warning beyond discussion.

I held my breath. Not out of awe. But out of the feeling that something inside us had just been knotted together that could no longer be untied.

Over on the merchant ship, there was movement. Slowly at first, then more frantically. You could see through the glass how men were running around, heads were being lifted, hands were pointing at something. And then I saw what a flag can really do: it can run across a deck without having feet. Fear is fast. Fear is faster than the wind.

"You see," someone said, and his voice was suddenly too high.

Briggs said nothing. He didn't grin. He just stood there and watched. Like a man who has just unlocked a door and wants to know who will walk in first.

The captain swallowed, and his Adam's apple bounced. "They could... they could fight," he murmured.

Tom looked at him as if he were examining an insect. "Of course they can fight," he said. "But now they have to want to."

We drew closer. The sea was calm, the wind favorable. Everything was on our side, which is rare. And as we headed toward the merchant ship, I felt something new inside me. Not just hunger. Not just anger. A kind of cold joy. Because I knew: Soon we would see if our piece of fabric worked. If the world would treat us differently now. If we were finally no longer the ones who were overlooked.

A flag doesn't need faith. It only needs the right moment when a stranger looks up and realizes that his life has just become smaller.

We drew closer, and the merchant ship suddenly no longer looked like a cozy floating shop, but like a fat animal just realizing it wasn't alone in the water. You could see it, not just in the men running across the deck, but in the way the whole ship seemed to stiffen. Some ships have a certain posture. This one now assumed the posture of a man who hears footsteps in the dark and immediately pretends to have a knife.

Our flag fluttered at the top like a dirty grin. The skull was still shiny from the tar, and below it hung this body that looked like someone had built it from a bad decision. I'd thought I'd feel great about it. And I did. But it was a cold greatness, not that warm, heroic shit. More like when you realize you're holding a lighter and the world around you is made of paper.

Over at the merchant ship, men stood at the railing, staring up, staring across, staring up again. Some had weapons in their hands, but you could see immediately: these weren't men who knew how to handle them. These were men who carried weapons because they hoped the weapon would then provide the courage for them. And hope, I knew by then, is a bad sailor.

Our captain was nervously fiddling with his sleeve. He was trying to sound important, but his body betrayed him. Anyone who's ever been truly afraid can see that immediately. He said, "Keep your distance," as if distance were some kind of moral code. Tom stood next to him, looking like he'd love to put the captain in a sack and throw him overboard, just to see if he'd float.

Briggs barked out orders, short and sharp. There was no theatrics. The man wasn't enthusiastic, not agitated, not romantic. He was focused. Like someone about to kick down a door, already knowing how many teeth might break. He steered the ship so we glided up to them like a shadow, not too fast, not too slow, precisely at the pace of a threat.

When we were within shouting distance, Tom called over: "Take down the sails and lie still. Otherwise, things will get unpleasant."

The word "uncomfortable" sounded like a judgment to him. Over there, chaos erupted. An officer, or whoever is allowed to play the important role on such ships, shouted something back, something about law and crown and that they were armed. That was the kind of thing men say when they think words could be bullets.

Tom waved casually, as if he'd just asked if anyone wanted sugar in their tea. "Great," he called out. "Then die looking good."

A few of us laughed. Not loudly. Just that short, mean-spirited burp of humor you get when you know something's about to happen. I felt my hands automatically tighten around the rope I was holding. Not because I needed them to. Because my body had learned that something was about to happen that couldn't be undone.

There was a moment on the merchant ship when they seriously considered fighting. You could see it in their faces: pride versus survival. And pride is an expensive hobby when you have children at home, or debts, or simply a neck you'd rather keep.

Then I saw one of them look up at the flag again. He stared at the hanging body, and his face went blank. That wasn't horror. That was his imagination running wild. He pictured himself hanging there, and that image made his legs weak. That's what it was all about. Not cannons. Not swords. Images.

A horn or some kind of signal sounded over there, frantic and wrong. Then their ship began to adjust its sails. Not for attack. For retreat. Our captain opened his eyes wide and made a noise as if he were about to pray.

"They want to run away!" he shouted.

Tom looked at Briggs. Briggs gave a slight nod. And then it happened: Our cannons became not a show, but a suggestion. A dull thud, not exactly precise, but loud enough that the world briefly held its breath. A cannonball hit the water, not far from her bow. A fountain of water shot up. No hit on the ship. But a hit in the mind.

You could see all movement over there come to a standstill. Suddenly, retreat was no longer an option. Retreat was nothing but panic, and panic is messy. A man fell, got up, and ran into another. Someone shouted something that was torn apart by the wind. And then, finally, came the most important moment: They began, slowly, hesitantly, to lower their sails.

Our captain exhaled as if he'd just decided not to die after all. He wanted to say something, something important, something that would make him look like the boss again. Briggs spoke first, without even looking at him.

"Grappling hooks," said Briggs. Short. Done.

Our men took off running. Hooks flew, ropes whirled, wood creaked, and the sea made that soft sound, as if it were rejoicing. I jumped in too, not in front, but close enough that I felt the distance between us and them close like a maw.

When we reached their railing, they were standing there, weapons in hand, but with eyes that had already given up. That's the strange thing: many men die while they're still standing. They're already dead inside. The rest is just movement.

Tom was the first to cross, like a cat climbing something because he can. He grinned at the men, broadly and dirty.

"Good decision," he said. "You're still alive. Today."

One of their officers—dapper, dapper to the bone—raised his saber a little anyway. It was more reflex than courage. Tom looked at him as if he were looking at a dog that was growling, even though he was already trembling.

"Put that away," Tom said calmly. "Otherwise, your widow will have to pick you back together in pieces later."

The officer swallowed. His gaze briefly drifted upwards, to the flag. And there it was again, that image. He sheathed his saber. Not because Tom was so convincing. But because the piece of fabric above them had just told him a story he didn't want to hear the end.

Briggs came over too, with the calm of a man who had already decided that everything here belonged to him, whether the others liked it or not. He didn't walk quickly. He walked in such a way that everyone made way. Like water finding its own path.

"Captain!" someone shouted from the back of the merchant ship.

A man stepped forward. Neat, well-groomed, but with eyes that had seen too many bills. His hands were clean. Too clean. I disliked him immediately.

"I am the captain," he said stiffly.

Briggs looked at him. "You were," he said.

The man stiffened. "You are committing piracy. You will be hanged."

Tom laughed loudly. "We'll all be hanged eventually, you philosopher. The only question is whether anyone will cry before then."

The captain blushed. He wanted to say something, something about rights, about the crown, about God. Briggs simply raised his hand, and suddenly there was silence. That was his talent: he could create silence without shouting.

"We'll take your cargo," said Briggs. "You'll stay alive if you behave. You don't move quickly. You don't look at anyone askance. And if any of you want to be heroic, please say so now so we can get this over with."

No one said anything. Of course not. Heroism is quiet when it counts. Most of the time it's not there at all.

I stood there, heard the wood beneath my feet, smelled a foreign ship, foreign tar, foreign fear. Fear smells the same everywhere. It's international. And I sensed how the flag above us worked, without lifting a finger. It hung there, flickering in the wind, and over there, men inwardly buckled with fear.

That was power. Not the power to hit someone. But the power to make them hit themselves before you even had a chance to strike.

Briggs sent men down to the cargo hold. Crates were counted, barrels rolled, bags filled. It was quick, efficient, without unnecessary bloodshed. Not out of humanity. Out of common sense. Dead personnel don't pull ropes. And a living victim later tells stories that make you

look bigger. That was the other truth: Sometimes you let people live so your reputation can consume them.

The captain of our ship stood on our side of the railing, acting as if he'd planned it all. He said, "Very good. Very good," and his voice sounded like he was praising a dog. Tom looked at him, and for a moment I thought, something stupid is going to happen. But Tom didn't. For now. Perhaps out of patience. Perhaps because he knew: The right moment for a captain like that is later. When no one is looking. Quiet, like the sea.

I took a few steps across the deck of the merchant ship, and a sailor there, a boy barely older than me, looked at me. He had tears in his eyes, not because he was soft, but because he was trying to push them away. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Please," he whispered. "I... I have nothing..."

I looked at him and heard myself say, "Then stay out of my way."

He nodded hastily, as if I had given him life. But all I had told him was how to survive: shrink down, be silent, hope. I despised him a little for that. And I envied him a little, because he could still hope.

As we crossed back over, the cargo in tow, I glanced up at our flag one last time. It fluttered differently now. No longer tired. It had taken on a profound significance. And I realized: This thing isn't just for others. It's for us too. It tells us who we are. It makes us something we might never be able to shake.

A flag doesn't need belief. But it creates it. In the victims, it creates fear. In the perpetrators, it creates a kind of religion based on greed and reputation. And religions are dangerous because they make you believe that everything you do is somehow justified.

I stood at the mast as the merchant ship behind us grew smaller, and I felt that grin inside me that I didn't like because it was too smug. I thought of the boy with the tears. I thought of the captain with the clean hands. I thought of how easy it had been to soften them, with just a piece of cloth.

And I thought: If it's that easy... how far can you take it?

The wind didn't answer. The wind just worked.

And the sea, silently devouring food, glided beneath us, patient as ever.

The beard grew out of hatred.

The beard didn't come about because I thought, "Now I'll be a handsome devil with a nice face for the audience." The beard came about because I was fed up with showing myself off. Because I was sick of men staring at your face as if it were an invitation to belittle you. I wanted a face that stared back without needing eyes. A face that seemed like a bad omen before I even opened my mouth.

In the beginning, it was just stubble. Dirty stubble that tasted of salt and too little sleep. The guys on board were joking. Of course they were joking. Men are like rats: when they have nothing to eat, they eat words. Tom once said: If you let it grow long enough, you can catch flies with it someday. I said: Then at least I'll have something I can control.

The captain acted as if he were still in charge, but after the attack on the merchant ship, he was just a man who happened to possess a key that no longer fit any door. He let us talk, he let us bargain, he let Briggs count and Tom threaten. He was the note on the bottle, not the rum. And everyone knew it. That was the kind of knowledge that slowly poisons a ship, like bad water.

We had loot, yes. Not enough to be rich, but enough to avoid starving again immediately. And with loot comes a new kind of hunger. One that isn't in your stomach. One that's in your head, saying: More. More. More. That's the moment when people start justifying themselves. That's the moment when you hear phrases like: We deserve it. Or: Those people over there would have wasted it anyway. Or: If we don't take it, someone else will. All convenient excuses so you don't see the boy's tearful face at night.

I still saw the face. Not every day. But it appeared when I was alone for too long. I didn't like that. So I rarely stayed alone for long.

The beard grew, and as it grew, something else grew too. A kind of anger that no longer just burns, but also shapes. Hate isn't just a feeling. Hate is a tool. And once you've learned to use tools, you eventually start to reshape yourself.

The men on board started calling me different things. At first, I was just the boy. Then I became the little one. Then I became the one who saw the skinny guy "fall." Later, I was the one with the stare that wouldn't go away. That's how names are. They stick to you like tar. And if you're unlucky, you can never get them off.

I overheard them talking about me when they thought I wasn't listening. Some said I was dangerous. Some said I was crazy. Some said both, and it sounded like admiration. People like to admire what they're afraid of. That's a kind of sickness, too.

Tom was the only one who didn't try to make me feel superior. He left me alone, in a strangely respectful way. Not friendly. For him, respect isn't a hug. Respect is distance. And on a ship, distance is sometimes the nicest thing you can get.

One evening we were sitting at the stern, the night was mild, the rum was there, but I didn't touch it. I didn't touch it on principle, but also because I realized: if I let the rum speak to me, I might say things I can't take back. Words are like knives. You can throw them, but you can't decide where they stick.

Tom took a sip, wiped his mouth, and looked at my beard, which was now more than just a shadow.

“You’re letting yourself become wild,” he said.

“The ship does that,” I said.

“No,” said Tom. “The ship is just wood. You do it.”

I grinned. “So? It suits me.”

He laughed briefly. “Standing? Kid, you don’t want to stand. You want people to fall over.”

He was right. And that was the problem: when someone is right, you just want to punch them.

“Why is he really growing?” asked Tom.

I looked at the water. It was black, but calm. Calm like an animal that has already eaten.

“So they don’t see what I’m thinking,” I said.

Tom nodded, as if he had expected exactly that. “And what do you think?”

I said: “That I no longer want to live for others. For their rules. For their fear. For their ridiculous belief that anything will get better on its own.”

Tom stared at me for a moment. Then he said: “Hate.”

I shrugged. “Hate keeps you warm.”

“And it makes you blind,” said Tom.

I looked at him. “You’re not blind?”

He grinned crookedly. “I’m only old enough to know that you don’t want to see everything.”

We were silent. Then we heard another argument at the bow of the ship. Keene, the one with the manners, was arguing with someone else about a share of the loot. Manners quickly disappear when gold is involved. Gold strips manners away like shirts.

Briggs arrived, said a few words, and the argument lessened. Not resolved. Just lessened. Briggs doesn’t resolve anything. Briggs holds things back until they eventually explode.

I watched and felt something creeping up my chest. Not envy. Not hunger. More like a cold disgust at this constant tug-of-war. These men had nothing left to lose, and yet they clung to every coin as if it were a piece of their soul. Perhaps it was.

“They will eat each other,” I said.

Tom took another sip. “Yes. And?”

“And I don’t want them to eat me.”

“Then eat first,” said Tom.

I laughed softly. “You sound like a preacher.”

“Preachers sell hope,” said Tom. “I only sell truth.”

That was his sense of humor. A sense of humor like a rusty nail in bread. You chew on it, you bleed, and somehow it's still the only meal you get.

The beard continued to grow. It became thicker, blacker, tougher. And I noticed the way men looked at it when I walked by. It wasn't admiration. It was that slight pause in their eyes, that tiny moment when a person considers whether to be friendly or to keep their distance. That pause was gold. Not the metal. The feeling.

In ports, if we even had to go into one to get water or for repairs, it was even more obvious. On land, people see your face first, then your hands. At sea, they see your hands first, then your face. I wanted them to see something everywhere that would make their stomachs churn. The beard helped with that. It didn't turn me into a monster. It just made visible what was already there: a man who was tired of explanations.

There were a few who suggested I cut it so I'd look "more presentable." More presentable. The word almost made me want to throw up. "Pretty" is the language of those who like to tell others what to do because otherwise their own lives would fall apart.

I said to someone who repeated that too often: “If you say ‘proper’ one more time, I’ll stuff proper teeth down your throat.”

He laughed at first. Then he saw my face. Then he stopped laughing. That's exactly how it should be.

And as the beard grew, so did the hatred. Not for individual men. Not for any god. Hatred for the idea that I should belittle myself. Hatred for the world that first shoves filth down your throat and then expects you to say thank you. Hatred for captains who hide while others bleed. Hatred for traders who talk a good game while breaking your back. Hatred for every hand that reaches out for you, not to hold you, but to use you.

The beard was like a repository for it all. A black sponge for everything I no longer wanted to swallow. I could feel it when the wind passed through it. It was as if the hatred were briefly singing. Not a song, more of a growl.

One night, when the sky was clear and the sea so calm it was almost insulting, I stood alone at the mast and looked up at the flag. Our symbol fluttered there, confident, dirty, effective. I thought about how quickly a piece of cloth had made us something others feared.

Then I thought: A beard is just a sign, too.

And signs are dangerous because at some point you start to believe them yourself.

I ran my fingers through the coarse hair and felt the salt in it. Salt and hate. Good mix. It preserves.

The beard eventually became more than just hair. It was weight. It was shadow. It was that damned feeling that you can't just brush yourself away anymore. When I bent over the deck in the morning and the wind hit my face, there was something dark hanging down there, fighting back. No big drama, just a constant: I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.

The funny thing is how quickly other people start making nonsense out of such rubbish. As if a beard is a biography. Men love symbols because they're too lazy to understand real people. You can judge a symbol in two seconds: dangerous or not, friend or foe, hurt or look away. A person is more complicated. So they make you a symbol so they don't have to think.

We docked at a port, a dirty stretch of coast where the houses looked like they'd been smelling of the sea for too long. Water, wood, and poverty. I had to go ashore with a few men because Briggs wanted it that way. To fetch water, exchange barrels, get some nails, some rope, and if luck was on our side, a little rum for those who, without it, wouldn't know how to hold their own hands.

I crossed the gangplank, and I felt it right then: stares. Not the usual stares you get as a sailor—the neutral "who are you, what are you lugging around, can I steal something?" This was different. This was that brief pause. That tiny hesitation in a stranger's face when he looks at you and is suddenly unsure whether he's allowed to laugh.

I liked that hesitation. It was like a small piece of power that no one had to officially give you. You simply took it.

In an alleyway, a mirror stood crookedly against a wall, in front of a shop that pretended to sell razors, but probably trimmed more throats than beards. I stopped, just for a moment, and looked at myself. Dirt on my face, salt in my eyes, my hair wild, my beard dark and messy, like a bad promise. I looked like someone you wouldn't want to hear behind you at night.

And I thought: Okay.

Then I heard giggling behind me. Two women, maybe, maybe just girls—I could never really tell in these places where life grows up faster than the body. They were standing in a doorway, wearing dirty aprons, their eyes too alert for their faces. One whispered something, and they both laughed again, but their laughter wasn't friendly. It was the kind of laughter that says: That guy is dangerous, but I'm still going to look because I'm only human.

I didn't even really turn around to face them. I just said, "If you want to see something, look quickly. I'll charge admission later."

They fell silent, then one of them laughed again, more quietly. "You're disgusting," she said.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm working on it."

Tom stood a few steps away, grinning as if he'd just seen someone bite a coin in half. "You have charm," he said.

"Charm is when you can stink and they still don't run away," I said.

"Or if they run away and you still have fun," said Tom.

We kept walking. Keene was with us, impeccably groomed as ever, as if he were afraid dirt was contagious. Keene hated my beard. Not because he hated hair. Keene hated anything that reminded him he had no control. And a beard is control that no one else has access to. You just grow. You just become. That drives people like Keene crazy.

At one point in that alley he said: "With a face like that, nobody takes you seriously. You look like a stray dog."

I stopped. Tom stopped too. The others pretended to suddenly study the clouds with great urgency.

"Street dogs survive," I said.

Keene snorted. "Street dogs are being beaten to death."

I stepped closer, very slowly. I didn't want to hit him. Not here. Not because I'd suddenly become moral. But because I realized how much Keene wanted it. He wanted me to play the beast so he could say afterward: See? That's exactly what I meant. That's how games are played. You don't win by giving the other person what they want.

"Do you know what will be killed?" I asked quietly.

Keene raised his chin, trying to appear brave. "What?"

"Men who talk too much when it's not their group."

He swallowed. I saw it. That tiny moment when he realized that words don't always protect. Then he recovered, like a drunkard clinging to the table. "You're threatening me?"

I smiled. "I'm just having a conversation. You just sound like you'd like to hear what it's like when someone finally stops listening to you."

Tom chuckled softly. Keene blushed. Red is a dangerous color for men who like to look their best. Red means: now comes pride. Pride means: now comes stupidity.

Keene turned away and walked faster. I let him. For now.

We got what we needed: water, nails, rope. A merchant tried to cheat us, thinking we were just poor sailors. Then he saw the flag on the mast out in the harbor, recognized the sign, and his voice suddenly changed. It's amazing how polite people become when they realize your knife isn't just a rumor.

As we walked back to the ship, the captain was standing on deck, acting as if he had everything under control. He was wearing a clean jacket, as if cleanliness were some kind of shield. He saw me coming, his gaze lingered on my beard, and I could practically see the wheels turning in his head: aversion, fear, then that ridiculous reflex to play the authority card.

"You should shave," he said.

I stopped at the bottom of the jetty and looked up. "Why?"

He grimaced as if I had insulted him simply for asking. "Because... because it's not tidy."

There it was again. That word. Neat. That word is like a wet rag on your face when you've just been pulled out of the sea.

"Decent," I repeated. "On a ship that stinks like an open coffin."

The captain stiffened. "I am the captain."

Tom came up behind me to the jetty and said, "You're the man with the cabin."

The captain pretended not to have heard. He looked at me again. "A beard doesn't make you stronger."

I nodded slowly. "That's right."

He seemed briefly relieved, as if he had won.

Then I said, "But he makes you weaker. Because you look at him and immediately have to say something. You can't even stay silent when it comes to my face. That's pretty pathetic."

A few men laughed. Not loudly, but it was there, that little crackle. The captain felt it. He felt his rank diminishing in the air.

"You don't respect me," he said.

I stared at him. "Respect has to be earned. You're hiding."

He inhaled as if he were about to shout, but then Briggs stepped out of the shadows, perfectly calm. Briggs didn't like noise unless he had ordered it himself.

"Captain," said Briggs, and the word sounded like a cough, "leave him alone. He looks the way he looks. You have other things to worry about."

"Which ones?" snarled the captain.

Briggs pointed only at the men carrying the barrels, the ropes, the cargo, the work. "These," he said. "The ones you can't control without a beard. And not with a beard either."

The captain went pale. Briggs simply carried on as if nothing had happened. But something had happened. It was a small cut, and small cuts bleed longer.

Later that night, when the crew was back on the ship and the land had become nothing but a dark blur, Keene came to me. Not alone. Of course not alone. Two others stood behind him, the way men stand behind other men when they hope that courage is contagious.

Keene said quietly, "You're getting too big."

I leaned against a mast and looked at him. "Too big for what? For your dreams?"

He gritted his teeth. "People listen to you."

"People listen to anyone who tells them what they already feel," I said. "They feel hunger. They feel anger. They feel that the captain is a fake."

One of the men behind Keene spat. The other looked away. Keene raised his hand as if to calm himself down. "You're putting on airs."

I raised my hands and looked at them briefly, as if they were strangers. Then I looked back at him. "I'm not acting at all. I'm just here. And you're afraid of me being here."

Keene stepped closer. "You think you're untouchable."

I laughed. "At sea, nobody is untouchable. Not even the sea. It just takes time."

That threw him off for a moment. He wanted a threat, he got philosophy. That rarely happened with me, but sometimes things like that slip out when you've spent too many nights staring into the wind.

"Your beard," Keene said suddenly, as if clinging to it, "is just for show. A costume."

I grinned, and I felt the beard move, heavy, like a curtain. "Then try to take it off me."

Silence. Keene looked at the two behind him. The two looked back. Neither wanted to be first. No wonder. The first one is always the one who bleeds the most.

Tom emerged from the darkness as if he'd sensed the scene. He stood beside me, didn't say a word, but his presence was like a knife on the table: you don't have to use it for everyone to know it's there.

Keene swallowed. "That's going too far," he muttered.

I nodded. "Finally, you're saying something right."

He turned and left. The two behind him followed quickly, as if glad to disappear again behind something that looked bigger than themselves.

Tom stopped next to me. "You're having fun," he said.

"Fun is a big word," I said. "I have... direction."

Tom stared at the water. "Direction can kill you."

"Anything can kill me," I said. "But at least I have some say in the matter."

Tom nodded slowly. "The beard suits you."

I looked at him. "You mean: hate suits me."

Tom grinned crookedly. "I mean, you're slowly becoming what you used to run away from."

I wanted to say something, something clever or disgusting, but I kept my mouth shut. Because he was right. And sometimes being right is the biggest blow.

That night I stood beneath the flag again, heard the creaking, smelled tar and salt, and felt the beard stir in the wind. Like an animal clinging to my face, demanding more and more space. And I realized: hate isn't just warmth. Hate is growth. It makes you seem bigger than you are, and eventually you become so big that you can no longer support yourself.

But until then... until then I would wear the beard as a warning.

Not to her.

To me.

Nights without stars

There are nights when the stars are there. You see them, and even if you hate them, they give you some damn spot in the sky to anchor your thoughts to. A few cold lights pretending there's order up there, while down here everything is just wood, hunger, and mistakes.

And then there are nights without stars.

Nights without stars are like a face without eyes. You look up, and nothing looks back. No comforting glimmer. No "Everything will be alright." Just blackness, thick as tar, as if the sky had decided to simply look away tonight so it could later claim it knew nothing.

These nights are the worst. Not because of the darkness. Darkness is normal. The sea is a black bastard most of the time anyway. No, the worst part is how silent the men become when there's nothing to distract them. Without stars, all they have left is what's crawling around inside them. And for most of them, that's not pretty.

We had a night like that shortly after the robbery. The loot lay at the bottom in crates, as if it were asleep. Gold never sleeps. It just closes its eyes and waits until you're foolish enough to embrace it. The men had eaten, drunk, argued, laughed, and then came that moment when everything leaks out like piss on wood: slowly, but inexorably. One by one, they crawled into their corner, as if the corner were home. A few stayed awake because they couldn't or wouldn't sleep. Sleep is dangerous when you're lying next to men who no longer trust themselves.

The wind was lazy. Not a real storm, not a real breath. Just a limp tug on the sails, as if someone with cold fingers were tugging at your shirt, unsure of what they wanted. The ship creaked softly, like old bones. And the sky was thick. No stars. Not even that thin strip of light that at least tells you something exists up above.

I was standing at the bow because my legs had carried me there. I had no particular reason. I just didn't want to be below deck. Below deck, life is too close. You smell too much humanity. Too much fear. Too much rum. Too much breath. At least on deck you have wind.

Wind is honest. Wind doesn't lie. It comes, it goes, it slaps you in the face, and if it kills you, at least it does it without sentimentality.

I leaned against the railing and stared into the blackness. Sometimes, when there are no stars, the sea disappears too. Then there's just a hole, a huge, cold hole, and you stand at the edge, unable to even tell which way is up. On nights like that, you understand why men jump. Not out of courage. Out of exhaustion. Out of a desire for the damned thinking to finally stop.

Behind me I heard footsteps. Light, cautious. Not Briggs. Briggs was walking as if the sound belonged to him. This was Tom.

He stood next to me without saying a word. We stood there like two bad statues that had been forgotten to be covered. After a while, he said, "Nights without stars drive men crazy."

"These men are crazy," I said.

Tom laughed softly. "Yes. But they'll notice tonight."

I spat over the railing. It landed somewhere in the void. "What do you want?"

Tom lit something, something small that glowed briefly. The smell wasn't tobacco. More like some cheap rubbish that insults your lungs. "Just looking," he said. "To see if you'll jump sometime."

"If I jump, I'll take you with me," I said.

Tom grinned. "At least that would be some company."

We fell silent again. Then we heard voices, farther back, near the mainmast. Muffled, but tense. Keene. Of course, Keene. The man was like a fly that keeps coming back to the same pile of shit, only to complain that it stinks.

"...that's not fair..." I heard him say.

Fair. On a ship, the word sounded like a joke that no one understood.

Tom blew out smoke. "Do you hear that?"

"Yes."

"He wants more."

"Everyone wants more."

Tom nodded. "Yes. But he wants to do it with words. And words are like little knives. They cut slowly."

I looked across into the darkness where the voices were. "And you? What do you want?"

Tom thought for a moment, as if the question were truly new to him. Then he said: "I want things to finally explode."

I laughed, not loudly, more like a dry exhalation. "You're a romantic idiot."

"Romantic is when you think there won't be a bang," said Tom. "Here, there's always a bang. It's just a question of whether you're controlling it or whether you're trapped beneath it."

That was the truth, as cold as a wet steel hook. I didn't like it. I liked it immediately.

We went back, slowly. The deck was dark, but by now I knew it like a scar on my own body. I saw where the planks gave slightly, where a crate stood, where a rope lay like a snake. These are the little things that keep you alive. Not prayers. Not stars. Knowledge.

Keene stood by the mainmast with two others. One of them was the one with the crooked eye. The other was someone whose name I didn't care about, because he only ever went along if he sensed a bigger man might be handing out something soon. Keene spoke softly, but his tone was sharp, as polished as he was.

"...Briggs counts us off," he said. "He distributes us as he sees fit. The captain is a shadow, Tom is a dog, and we... we are the ones who do the work."

Tom stopped. "And you're the one talking," he said.

Keene whirled around. His face was briefly startled, then smoothed out again, as if he were ironing it. "I'm just talking about justice."

Tom laughed. "Justice? On a ship? You're quite the artist."

Keene glared. "If we're not careful, Briggs will take everything."

Tom stepped closer, very calmly. "Briggs isn't taking anything. He's just holding it all together so we don't all starve."

Keene snorted. "You're defending him?"

"I'm not defending anyone," said Tom. "I'm just counting risks."

Keene glanced at me briefly. I realized he was trying to involve me in his scheme. Keene uses people like words: until they're broken.

"And him?" Keene asked. "The one with the beard. The new hero. What does he say about it?"

I looked at him and felt my beard grow heavy in the wind, as if he were laughing. "I say," I said slowly, "that nights without stars are bad times to talk about fairness."

Keene gritted his teeth. "You're scared."

I grinned. "No. I just don't want you shoving your mouth in my face just because you think you can change the world that way."

The one with the crooked eye laughed briefly. Keene blushed, and for him, blushing always meant: pride has just beaten his brains.

"You're putting on airs," Keene said.

"You play your cards right," I said. "And yet you still stink."

Tom giggled, and that made Keene even angrier because he realized he didn't have the stage he wanted.

"There will be a decision," Keene said quietly, almost threateningly. "This team needs order."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Order? I know that word. People say it right before they slit someone's throat."

Keene swallowed, but he didn't let go. "We need someone to lead."

Tom grinned. "Just say it: You want it."

Keene wanted to object, but in the darkness any hesitation sounded like an admission. He said, "I just don't want us to be dependent on a man who treats us like cattle."

I thought of Briggs. Of his composure. Of his reckoning. Of the way he sorts through death like a barrel. Cattle. Yes. But cattle sometimes live longer if someone's counting them.

I looked at Keene. "And you would treat us like what? Like guests?"

Keene snapped. "I would divide fairly."

"Share fairly," I repeated. "That sounds like a man who has never really been hungry."

Keene took a step towards me. His eyes were shining. Rumour or anger, both make people stupid. "You think you're untouchable because you have a beard and because you once—"

He stopped. He didn't want to say the word. He didn't want to say "killed." Because words make things real. And Keene only wanted to be as close to reality as it suited him.

I also took a step closer. "Say it," I said. "Or swallow it down."

Keene pressed his lips together. "Because you once made someone... disappear."

Tom laughed. "Careful, Keene. You're tripping over your own hints."

The wind swept across the deck, cold, with no stars above us, and I felt the night press us closer together. It was as if the sky were saying: No light for you. Find your own way. And men often find their way on nights like these with knives.

I looked at Keene and said quietly, "If you want to lead, then lead. But stop pretending to be a decent man. Decent men don't end up here."

Keene was breathing rapidly. The one with the crooked eye rubbed his hands together as if looking forward to conversation. Tom stood there like a patient curse. And I realized: nights without stars are the nights when words cease to be just words.

Somewhere wood creaked. Somewhere metal clanged. Maybe it was just a hook. Maybe it was a knife just emerging from its sheath.

And I thought: Good. If the sky is already looking away, we can finally be honest.

The darkness clung to you like tar under your fingernails. You wipe, you scrape, you spit – it stays. And without stars, every sound feels like an insult. Every step becomes a decision. Every breath sounds like it's betraying something.

Keene was still standing there, polished in his mind, dirty in his heart. He pretended to want order, but I saw the trembling behind his forehead. That trembling wasn't fear of Briggs or Tom. That trembling was fear that he was nobody. And that's the worst kind of fear. You can't run away from that. It hangs on your back like a sack of stones.

"So you mean we should all chain ourselves to Briggs," Keene said, quietly but venomously. "Because he's so... convenient."

Tom snorted. "You're confusing 'practical' with 'alive'."

"Life is chance," Keene said. "Practical is control."

I had to laugh. Really. Short, hard. "Control?" I said. "You're standing on a board in the water, Keene. A board that could break at any moment. And you're talking about control."

Keene glared at me. "You talk too much for someone who's supposedly so dangerous."

"Dangerous people sometimes talk," I said. "So that the stupid ones know when to keep their mouths shut."

The one with the crooked eye laughed again, that rickety laugh, as if he were counting his own teeth. That made Keene even more sour. He wanted an audience, but he wanted applause. He got laughter. It's like rum without the buzz: just bitter.

"You think you are this," Keene hissed.

"At least I'm not you," I said.

His arm twitched. Not as an attack, more like a reflex, a brief attempt to prove to himself that he still had something left. Tom raised his hand, quite calmly.

"Not here," said Tom. "Not now."

Keene was breathing heavily. I could even smell his breath through the wind: rum and wounded pride. A mixture that has killed more men than cannons.

"A night will come," Keene said, and he meant it like a prophecy, as if he were a priest in the dirt. "A night when someone decides."

"Someone decides every night," I said. "Some only decide whether to take another sip."

Keene pressed his lips together, turned abruptly, and left. The two shadows he had brought with him immediately followed, relieved that they weren't the first to bleed. The one with the crooked eye stood for a moment, grinning into the darkness as if he'd just made a bet, and then strolled off as well.

Tom and I stayed behind.

"He really wants it," said Tom.

"He wants to be counted," I said.

"It's the same thing," said Tom.

We stood there, and the sea was only sound, black and boundless. No stars. No up. No down. You can lose yourself in a night like that without moving.

"Briggs knows," said Tom after a while.

"Briggs knows everything that smells like trouble," I said.

Tom nodded. "And sometimes he lets it grow."

"So that he can harvest it later," I said.

Tom grinned briefly. "See? You're learning."

We went our separate ways, each to our own corner, but no corner was truly safe. I didn't lie down. I stayed on deck. Part of me didn't want to surrender the night to the others. When you fall asleep, others continue writing your story, and most of the time they write it with a knife.

I walked slowly along the deck, letting my fingers glide over ropes, wood, and metal. The ship had become familiar, but on nights without stars, even the familiar becomes strange. Everything looks the same. Everything can be anything. A crate can be a hiding place. A shadow can be a man. A man can be a problem.

As I descended to the hatches, I heard a soft click. Not loud. Exactly what the darkness loves: small sounds that fill your head until you think you're hearing ghosts.

I stopped. I listened.

Nothing.

Then that clacking sound again, as if metal were striking metal. A tool. A hook. Or a blade that someone pulls from its sheath and puts back in because they're not quite sure yet.

I walked on, not quickly. Quickly is suspicious. Quickly is fear. I didn't want to look like fear. Fear is a scent men follow when they're hungry.

A lantern stood at the edge of the deck, half-burned. Its light was dim, but just enough to see faces if they were close enough to bite you. I stood beside it, pretending to look out at the water, waiting. If someone comes, I want to hear them first. Or see them. Or smell them.

And then one came.

Not Keene. Not Tom. One of the followers. The guy with the fidgety hands, who always shows up where there might soon be something to be gained. He arrived slowly, as if he were just passing by. But nobody is just passing by on a night like this.

"You are not asleep," he said.

"Neither do you," I said.

He scratched his neck. "Bad night."

"Bad nights are the norm here," I said. "You're new to this misery?"

He laughed uncertainly. "I... I just thought..."

"If you're already thinking about it, do it quickly," I said. "Otherwise you'll feel sick."

He swallowed. "Keene says things have to change."

I looked at him. "And you? What do you say?"

He avoided my gaze, staring at the water as if the water could help him. "I'm not saying anything. I just want... I don't want to end up on the wrong side."

I grinned. "You don't want to die."

He nodded hastily.

"Then listen," I said. "The wrong end is usually the one where you think you're being smart because you're clinging to someone. Being smart is realizing you're alone and still breathing."

He frowned, as if that were too much philosophy for his skull. "Keene says Briggs will sell us all out."

"Keene talks a lot," I said. "Keene talks because talking is his only muscle."

The man stepped closer and whispered: "And you? You would Briggs too... you would..."

He couldn't bring himself to say it. Again, this constant dancing around words. Everyone wants blood, but no one wants the word "blood" on their lips, because it tastes like iron.

"I wouldn't do anything," I said. "I would just survive."

He stared at me as if I had just pulled the rug out from under him. "That's all?"

"What do you want? An anthem?" I laughed softly. "There are no anthems at sea. Only screams."

He jutted out his lower lip, offended. "Keene says you're on your own side."

“Keene is right for once,” I said. “And you should be on your own side, too. But you’re too cowardly. You want a group so you can say later: I had no other choice.”

He blushed in the dim light. Anger, shame, fear – all at once. And right then I heard the click again, this time closer. Footsteps, soft. Someone was coming out of the darkness.

Tom.

He arrived as he always does: without haste, but with the feeling that he was already there before you saw him. He stood beside me, looked at the follower, glanced at him briefly, like an insect.

"You're disturbing me," said Tom.

The follower swallowed. "I... I just wanted to talk."

“You can talk to the sea,” said Tom. “At least it doesn’t answer back.”

The follower took a step back. “No—”

Tom raised his hand and stopped him. "Keene isn't here."

"Not yet," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "He'll come. Nights without stars attract Keene like flies to shit."

The follower retreated further, and I saw the relief in his face that he now had a reason to leave. He disappeared into the darkness, quickly, as if hoping the night would forget his face.

Tom stayed. We both stood there, and above us was only blackness. No star, no comfort.

"He collects," Tom said quietly.

“Keene,” I said.

Tom nodded. "Yes."

"And Briggs?" I asked.

Tom spat over the railing. "Briggs collects too. Just differently."

That was the sentence that briefly chilled me to the bone. Not because I suddenly feared Briggs, but because I realized I was caught between two collectors. One collects men with words, the other with fear. And in the end, both collect the same thing: obedience.

"What do you want?" I asked Tom.

He didn't look at me. He looked out at the sea, as if reading the answer out there. "I don't want us to die for idiots," he said.

"That's a lovely wish," I said. "Almost like a star."

Tom laughed softly. "And you?"

I felt my beard in the wind, heavy, rough, like an animal. "I want," I said slowly, "that when it bangs, it doesn't bang in my back."

Tom nodded. "Then stay awake."

"I'm awake," I said.

"More alert," said Tom.

He turned and left without another word. That was his style. No hug, no encouragement. Just a short sentence that sticks in your head like a nail.

I stayed at the railing and stared into the blackness. Somewhere wood creaked. Somewhere a rope slapped against a mast. And somewhere, in an angle I couldn't see, someone whispered. Perhaps Keene. Perhaps one of his shadows. Perhaps just the ship telling itself stories.

Nights without stars make the world feel small. They squeeze you until you can smell your own thoughts. And my thoughts smelled of tar, of blood, of that new flag up there that promised us something we could never take back.

I thought of the boy on the merchant ship, of his tears. I thought of the thin man, of his quiet end. I thought of Keene, dapper and venomous, like a knife with gloves. And I thought: We're all already on our way. We're only pretending we still have a choice.

The sky remained black. No stars. No witnesses.

That was perhaps the best part.

The night didn't get brighter. It just got older. And old nights have a kind of humor you only understand when someone's picking your teeth out.

I stayed awake because Tom had said so, and because my body had already learned that sleep is a luxury for those who aren't surrounded. I walked slowly across the deck, over and over again the same paths, over and over the same spots, as if rubbing away the darkness. The ship smelled of tar and cold wood. The wind smelled of nothing. No stars above us, so no direction. When you wake up on a night like this, you might as well be underwater. The only difference is that you're still breathing.

Once I heard a soft laugh, somewhere in the distance. A short, choppy sound, as if someone were trying to sound brave and realizing that courage doesn't come on command. Then silence again.

Later, I heard voices below deck. Not drunk, not loud. Whispered. The whispers of men who think they're being clever by being quiet. That's the beauty of it: any idiot can be quiet. Being quiet doesn't make you invisible. It just makes you easier to miss when you're begging for help.

I stayed up top. Not because I lacked the guts to go down. But because I realized: if you go anywhere on a night like that, you're going exactly where someone wants you to be. So I stayed where I had the best view. And on a ship, a good view is almost as good as a weapon.

Then Keene came along.

Of course. Like Tom had said. Keene emerged from the darkness, dapper even in the shadows, shoulders straight, as if posture could make him a leader. Behind him were two men, and I recognized their footsteps: followers. Guys who toss their lives like a coin and hope it doesn't land on death.

Keene stopped a few steps away, as if he respected me. He didn't respect me. He was just afraid I was fast.

"You're on guard duty," he said.

"I'm keeping myself awake," I said.

He smiled thinly. "So you think you're important."

"It's important enough that you come with an escort," I said.

The two behind him exchanged brief glances, that nervous back-and-forth, as if their courage were bought on credit. Keene's lips curled into a twitch. He didn't want to show it, but he didn't like it either. Keene never liked it when someone held a mirror up to him.

"We're talking," he said.

"You're talking," I said. "Maybe I'll listen."

"You should listen," Keene said. "You're new, but the men are looking at you. At your... entrance."

"Say Bart," I said.

Keene grimaced. "I don't like to say that."

"Yes," I said. "Because he makes you nervous."

His eyes flashed. "Listen. Briggs is playing king here. He's handing things out. He's threatening. He's counting. And he's going to drive us into the ground because he thinks he's smarter than the sea."

"He's smarter than you," I said.

That was perhaps too direct. Keene inhaled sharply. He took a step, but stopped again, as if he realized he was about to step into an abyss.

"So you're on his side," he said.

I shook my head. "I'm on my side."

Keene nodded, as if he considered it a mistake that could be corrected. "Then make it easy on yourself. Side with the winning team."

"Which page is this?" I asked.

Keene smiled a little wider now, and there it was: the narcissism. The man truly believed he was the answer. He was the end of all problems. Keene as savior. Keene as order. Keene as a pretty lie.

"The men's side," he said.

I laughed. "Briggs is a man too."

Keene got angry. "Briggs is an executioner. He's not one of us. He's using us."

"You would use us too," I said. "You would just call it something nicer."

He leaned forward slightly, his voice quieter, more venomous. "I would share fairly."

I stared at him. "And what if that's not enough?"

Keene blinked. "What?"

"If it's not enough," I repeated. "If we're hungry. If water is scarce. If the loot fails to materialize. What will you do then, Keene? Divide fairly until everyone is equally dead?"

His gaze flickered. For a moment, the real Keene was there: a man who has no plan, except that he likes to see himself in front. Then he composed himself again.

"We must stick together," he said.

"Sticking together," I said slowly, "is a word used by people who are about to betray someone."

The two behind him shuffled their feet. One made a restless movement, as if thinking about something under his jacket. A knife? A rope? Something you could quickly slip into someone else's body to feel brave afterward.

Keene also realized that the tide was turning. He changed tactics. Keene wasn't brave, but he was persistent.

"You made a man disappear," he said quietly. This time he said it outright, without mincing words. Perhaps because he thought it gave him power over me.

I raised my eyebrows. "And you didn't stop it."

Keene froze for a moment. He wanted to accuse me, and I made him an accomplice. That's the problem with dirt: if you look at it for too long, you realize you're dirty too.

"Briggs knows," Keene said quickly, as if trying to salvage what he could. "He lets you go. Why? Because you're useful to him. Because you're his dog."

I took half a step closer, not aggressively, just enough for him to sense it. "Dog?"

Keene stood his ground, but his Adam's apple bounced. "Yes."

I nodded slowly. "Then I'll bark now."

He stared at me.

I said, "If you come at me like that again, Keene, it won't just be words that disappear. Something you really like will disappear. For example, your pretty face."

The two behind him flinched. One wanted to say something, but Keene raised his hand. He wanted to maintain control. He wanted to be the one spreading fear.

"You're threatening me," Keene said.

"No," I said. "I'm just making the night easier for you. Without stars, it's hard to find your way. I'm showing you yours."

Keene took a deep breath, and I saw him pull himself together. Then he started again, like a player desperate to win back his last bet.

"Briggs will fall," Keene said. "Soon. And when he falls, everyone standing next to him will fall too."

There it was. The sentence. No more philosophy, no more fairness. That was an announcement.

I felt my body tense up. Not with fear. With clarity. That was the moment when the night suddenly took on a face.

"And you want me to stand next to you," I said.

Keene smiled again, briefly, as if this were finally the moment I understood. "I want you to survive."

"You want me to have your back," I said.

"Isn't that the same thing?" he asked.

I laughed softly. "Maybe for you."

Then we heard footsteps. Heavy. Certain. Not creeping. Briggs.

He emerged from the darkness, as if he were the darkness itself and had just decided to become visible. He stopped, saw Keene, saw the two followers, saw me. His gaze was calm. And it was precisely that calmness that made it dangerous. Briggs was never surprised. He was just sometimes there sooner than you'd like.

"Keene," said Briggs.

Keene turned slowly around, and I saw his face briefly lose color. He tried to look neat again immediately, but you can't iron fear.

"Briggs," Keene said, too kindly. "We're just talking."

Briggs nodded. "I heard that."

Keene swallowed. "You're spying."

Briggs grinned thinly. "I'm counting."

He stepped closer, so close that Keene instinctively took a step back. And that was it. That one step. That one step that tells an entire ship: The man up ahead just flinched.

Briggs glanced over the two companions. "And you," he said quietly, "you're like bad shoes. You run everywhere, but you don't know why."

One of them opened his mouth, then closed it again. The other stared at the planks as if he could hide in them.

Keene said: "You can't go on forever—"

Briggs raised his hand, stopping him as if Keene were a barking dog. "You want leadership," Briggs said. "Then lead. But lead now."

Keene blinked. "What?"

Briggs nodded towards the railing. "Spring."

Silence.

That wasn't a joke. That wasn't a quip. That was an invitation that could only accept one answer. Keene stood there, impeccably dressed, and suddenly all his talk was worthless. Because words aren't a plank. Words don't support you.

"You're sick," Keene whispered.

Briggs nodded. "Yes." Then he looked at me. "And you're awake."

I said nothing. I was suddenly very quiet. I felt my hands. I felt them remembering. Of dew. Of pressure. Of the end.

Keene looked at me, briefly, panicky, as if he were only now realizing that he hadn't won me over to his side, but only brought me closer to the truth. I looked back and thought: So this is the night things go wrong.

Briggs took another step closer. Keene dodged, another small retreat. And with that, everything was said, without another word being spoken.

"Go to sleep," Briggs told the followers.

They left. Quickly. Grateful that they didn't have to play the main role.

Keene stopped, alone, smartly dressed in the shade, trying to maintain his dignity like a lantern in the wind.

Briggs said quietly, "Nights without stars are good. You can see the fear better."

Then he turned and left, as if that were settled. As if Keene were just a checklist item.

Keene stayed behind, staring after me, staring after Briggs, staring into nothingness. And I saw it in his face: he had just understood that he was no longer playing. He was now part of the game.

I stood at the railing, alone, and the sky remained black. No stars. No witnesses. Only the sea, silently devouring everything.

And somewhere deep inside me was this cold, nasty laugh, which did not come from joy, but from anticipation of what was inevitable.

Because I knew: If Briggs becomes so open, if he keeps Keene on such a short leash, then the moment will soon come when one of them really falls.

And I wouldn't be the one asleep when that happens.

Blood pays better than honesty.

The next morning, Keene was silent. Not the kind of silent that signifies peace. More the kind of silent who has a knife and hasn't yet decided what to do with it. He walked across the deck, impeccably groomed as ever, but his eyes were different. They had acquired that thin, hard edge that men get when they realize that talking no longer saves them. Words are nice as long as the world is listening. Once the world starts just rocking you to the bone, words are nothing but froth.

Briggs acted as if nothing had happened. That was his talent. He could push someone to the edge of a precipice in the night and in the morning be talking about rations again as if he'd only commented on the weather. He shouted orders, had ropes tied, had the cargo sorted. Everything ran smoothly. Everything reeked of routine. Routine is the band-aid over violence.

I stuck to my work and to the silence. Not because I'd suddenly become clever, but because I realized: every wrong move was now an invitation. The men were looking more. They weren't looking like they used to, when you were just another body. They were looking as if we were now in a phase where you have to decide who will still be breathing tomorrow. And when it comes to decisions, people tend to go for what feels easy. Blood is easy. Honesty is complicated.

We had loot that hadn't been fully distributed yet. Crates, bolts of cloth, metal, little things traders love because they suddenly look important in their delicate hands. And of course, gold. Not enough to buy a new life, but enough to make you think your old one is even more

miserable than before. That's the insidious thing about gold: it shows you what you don't have, and it pretends you could have it if you just get a little dirtier.

Briggs was counting. Always counting. He had the crates opened, looked inside, hummed numbers as if they were prayers. Tom stood beside him, not as a watchdog, more as a reminder that you can't just knock Briggs over without a crash. The captain was sitting somewhere, probably pretending to study charts again. He was likely just studying how to remain a coward without being noticed.

Keene would just show up at some point, as if he'd happened to be there by chance. That was the next thing I hated about him: he always acted like everything was an accident. Like he was never the one who started it. Keene wanted clean hands, but he wanted dirty results.

"How much is left for the team?" Keene asked loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Briggs didn't even look up properly. "Enough."

Keene smiled thinly. "Enough is a word for people who don't want to share."

Briggs slowly raised his gaze. Not angrily. Calmly. "Enough is a word for people who want to live."

"We will still live if you share fairly," Keene said.

Tom laughed softly. "You won't get tired, will you?"

Keene ignored Tom. He just looked at Briggs. "You're keeping us down."

Briggs slid the crate shut, snapping it shut like a mouth about to bite. "I'll keep you all together."

"Together," Keene said, "is another word for on a leash."

Briggs looked at him for a long time. Then he said, "You want the share? Then take one. But if you take what isn't yours, then you'll pay."

Keene grimaced. "With what?"

Briggs grinned thinly. "With blood. What else?"

That was a sentence no one commented on aloud because it was too true. At sea, you always pay with blood. If not yours, then that of someone stupid enough to stand near you.

Keene took a step forward. "You're constantly threatening us. That's not leadership. That's fear."

Briggs nodded. "Fear is useful."

Keene snarled. "Fear breeds rebellion."

There it was. The word that hung in the air like a stench no one could ever get rid of. Mutiny. Everyone thought it, but no one wanted to say it first, because the word opens a door. Keene had now left the door ajar.

Tom grinned and said, "So you want to bang."

Keene looked at Tom. "I want the team to decide."

Briggs gave a short laugh. A dry, almost inhuman sound. "The crew decides every day. They decide whether to work. Whether to eat. Whether to sleep. You don't need any more decision than that."

Keene raised his chin. "Then let them decide who leads."

Silence.

I felt it, this silence that isn't empty, but full. Full of possibilities. Full of knives still in pockets. Full of faces considering whether to be brave today or dead tomorrow.

Briggs looked around the room. His eyes slid over each person as if he were counting who was wiggling. Then he said, "Good."

Keene smiled as if he had just won.

Briggs raised a hand. "Tonight," he said. "After the watch. Here. Everyone. Then we'll talk."

"Talking," murmured Tom, "is Keene's favorite sport."

Keene ignored the mockery. He was too busy feeling like a winner. Winners like to feel secure just before they fall.

The day continued, but the atmosphere was different. Every step had a subtle echo. Every glance was a test. Men began to stand in groups. Not large groups, just enough to make you realize: there's one side. There's another. And you're caught in between. Always caught in between. That's the worst part. Not the hostility. The uncertainty.

In the evening, when the sun had set and the sky thickened again, hunger rose. Not for food. For a decision. The men drank more. Of course they drank more. Rum is the only thing many of them can still mistake for courage. And courage that comes from a bottle usually ends in blood. That's why the sea loves rum. Rum makes its work easier.

I didn't drink. I just sat there, leaning against a crate, watching. Keene spoke to people, quietly, kindly, impeccably. He handed out phrases like coins. Each phrase a small purchase: If things go wrong, think of me. Briggs didn't sit. Briggs walked. He walked across the deck, checking ropes, checking men, checking the darkness. As if he knew that tonight the night wasn't just black, but political.

Tom came over to me and sat down next to me as if it were a joke. "Do you think he'll go through with it?" he asked.

"Keene will only draw if someone else draws first," I said.

Tom nodded. "And Briggs?"

"Briggs always pulls through," I said. "He just pulls quietly."

Tom grinned. "The sea eats silently. So does Briggs."

I looked at him. "And us?"

Tom shrugged. "We are just what's left behind."

That feeling came back to me, that cold clarity. Blood pays better than honesty. Honesty in that moment would have meant standing up and saying: Keene will sell you out. Briggs will use you. Tom will laugh. I will survive. But honesty gets you nowhere here. Honesty is a luxury you can only afford when you're safe. And you're never safe on a ship.

Night drew nearer like an animal. You could feel it. Men went to their posts earlier. One sharpened a knife without concealing it. Another re-tied a rope as if it were merely work, but his fingers were too fast, too nervous. Keene stood at the mast, staring into the darkness as if trying to believe himself. Briggs stood at the stern, still, looking not at the sea, but at the crew. He looked where the sea is more dangerous: at people.

And I stood there and realized: Tonight, people won't talk because they want to. Tonight, people will talk because everyone knows that words are only the beginning. After that comes the language that everyone understands.

The language of blood.

The gathering began as everything on a ship begins: not with the sound of a bell, but with that creeping feeling that no one could pretend anymore that they were there by chance. One after another, they emerged from their corners, from their blankets, from their rum, from their fear. They stood in a semicircle, as if looking at a fire that wasn't yet lit, but already stinked.

The sky was thick. No stars. Of course not. Stars might have pretended there were rules up there. Tonight there were no rules. Tonight there were only men who had been hungry for too long and now suddenly believed they had a right to more than just breathe.

Briggs wasn't standing at the front like a preacher. He stood to the side, near the stern, as if he were part of the scenery. That was his trick. He didn't want to look like the one leading. He wanted to look like the one who was simply already there when others started to lead. Tom was leaning against a mast, as if he were tired. Tom always looks tired, even when he's already counting the knives in his head. The captain stood a little apart, prim and pale, and his face held that helpless "please save me" look you see on men who suddenly realize that titles aren't a shield.

Keene stepped forward. Of course. Keene was impeccably groomed, but tonight he wasn't shining with cleanliness, but with rage. He raised his hands as if he were giving a speech, and I almost laughed because he looked like one of those dockside preachers who try to tell you that God loves you while simultaneously taking the last coin out of your pocket.

"We're here," Keene began, his voice loud enough to feign courage, but not loud enough to be truly certain. "We're here because we all know something's rotten."

A murmur went through the men, a sound of agreement that really just means: Yes, I want more, but you say it first, so that later I can say I was just there.

Keene nodded as if he'd just received applause. "We risk our lives," he said. "We fight. We bleed. And yet—" He nodded toward Briggs. "—one guy acts like he's the only one who gets to count."

Briggs didn't move. He didn't even smile. He was just silent, and his silence was louder than Keene's voice.

Keene continued: "We need order. We need fairness. We need—"

"We need rum!" someone shouted, and a few laughed. Keene flinched as if he'd been hit with a wet sock. He hated it when reality ruined his beautiful words.

"Yes," Keene said quickly, "rum too. But most of all, we need a captain who..." He paused briefly, looked at the real captain as if he were only just noticing him. The captain blinked and looked as if he wished the ground would swallow him up. Keene saved himself: "...who leads. Who respects the crew."

Tom let out a low, dirty laugh. Keene ignored it, but I saw how it affected him. Tom was poison you couldn't spit out because it was already in your blood.

"And who is that supposed to be?" someone shouted.

Keene raised his chin. "One of us."

"That sounds like you," said Tom, and this time his tone was not just mockery, but a blade.

Keene turned to Tom. "If you're just joking—"

"Making jokes keeps us alive," said Tom. "Your speeches don't."

Keene gritted his teeth. "You're Briggs' dog."

Tom shrugged. "And you're a man who likes to bark, but doesn't like to bite."

The murmuring grew more nervous. Men began to shift, small steps, barely perceptible, but everything about them said: Now they're already finding their position. Like before a storm. You sense it before it arrives.

Keene raised his hands again. "Listen!" he shouted. "We decide today. Either we let things continue as they are, with Briggs controlling everything—"

"I'm not controlling anything," Briggs said suddenly, calmly. No shouting. Just that vise-like tone that makes the air tighter. "I'm keeping the ship alive."

Keene laughed, too harshly. "Alive? We are slaves to your whim."

Briggs took a step forward. Just one. And Keene, unintentionally, took half a step back. That was all there was to it. That was the whole truth in two movements.

Briggs looked around the room. "Anyone who thinks I'm taking something away from them should say so," he said. "Now. Not later in whispers and rum."

No one said anything. Of course not. Men want revolution, but they prefer it as a gift, without having to lift a finger themselves.

Keene sensed this and raised his voice again, realizing the audience was turning away from him. "Do you see?" he shouted. "That's fear! He's scaring you!"

"Fear is free," Briggs said. "I don't have to work for it."

A few people laughed uncertainly. Keene blushed. "You're sick," he spat.

Briggs nodded. "Yes. So what? Sick means: adapted to this world."

The captain suddenly ventured forward, as if he had realized he would otherwise be forgotten. "I... I am the captain," he said, his words as thin as an apology.

Silence. And then, somewhere, a short giggle. Someone had to laugh because it was too ridiculous. The captain looked around, and his face fell.

Tom said, "You're the man with the cabin."

The captain opened his mouth, then closed it again. Words found no purchase. Words at sea are like soap: they slip through your fingers when you need them most.

Keene seized the moment. "Then let's vote," he shouted. "Now! Everyone says who they follow."

I felt my stomach go cold. Not because of the idea. Because of the mechanics. Voting means: you reveal yourself. And those who reveal themselves are more easily found later.

Briggs looked at Keene. "Good," he said. "Then begin."

Keene blinked. "What?"

Briggs gestured around the room. "Say your names. Who follows you?"

Keene hesitated for only a moment, but that moment was enough. Then he pointed to one. "He." Then to the next. "He." Then another. "And he."

Three. Four. Five. Not a small number, but not enough to be certain. And I saw: Keene didn't choose the strong. He chose the discontented. Those who feel disadvantaged. Those who believe they are entitled to something. These are the best recruits because they convince themselves.

Briggs said, "Good." Then he looked around the room. "And who's following me?"

That was the difference. Keene had to point. Briggs only had to ask. And suddenly, men moved. Not many steps, but they positioned themselves differently. Closer. Near him. Like children who unconsciously move toward the larger shadow when there's a bang.

I saw the one with the crooked eye. He stood next to Briggs. Harkness did too, without a word. Tom stayed where he was, but his look said it all: If anyone touches Briggs, they have to go through me first. And I realized: Briggs didn't have "fans." He had survival instinct as an accessory.

Keene saw it and became frantic. "You're blind!" he shouted. "You're—"

"No," someone said. "We're just not stupid."

And that was it. That was the first open crack.

Keene turned to the man. "You little rat—"

The man stepped closer. "Say it again."

Keene made the mistake of touching him. Just a grab at his shirt, a "I'm more important" grab. It was nothing. And yet it was everything. Because as soon as Keene reached out his hand, words became bodies.

The man struck. A short, hard blow, right in the face. Keene's head jerked sideways. Blood spurted from his nose, dark in the lamplight. Keene stumbled, clutching his nose, his eyes suddenly wide with surprise, as if the world had insulted him.

The murmuring grew louder. A few men laughed. Others cursed. One took a step forward as if to help Keene, then stopped again, realizing that help tonight meant a ticket.

Keene stared at the man, blood on his fingers. "You... you hit me."

The man spat. "Blood pays better than honesty."

I don't know if he truly thought the sentence or if he only said it because it sounded good. But in that moment, it fit like a glove. And I saw Keene understand: Talk is over. Now it's time to pay.

Briggs didn't intervene. Of course not. He just watched. He let it go on, long enough for everyone to realize: those who hesitate tonight will be counted later.

Keene straightened up, wiped away the blood, and his gaze turned cold. No longer offended. Now he was dangerous. Offended men are loud. Cold men are quiet.

"Fine," Keene said hoarsely. "Then that's how it will be."

His hand went under his jacket.

I saw it. Tom saw it. Briggs saw it, of course. The air held for a moment.

And I noticed how my own hands remembered. Of dew. Of pressure. Of the end. They didn't want me to think. They wanted to act before the first stitch was even stung.

But I remained silent, for the length of a heartbeat, and thought: This is the moment Keene wanted. Finally, no more talk. Finally, blood that can be counted.

Keene drew a blade. Not large, but clean. One of those fine, ugly blades that don't look like work, but like intention. He held it not like a professional, but not like a novice either. He held it like a man who had long dreamed of this.

Briggs said quietly, "Put it away."

Keene laughed, briefly and brokenly. "Now you suddenly want peace?"

"I want order," said Briggs. "And you are chaos right now."

Keene took a step forward.

And at that moment, Tom stepped out of his shadow. Quickly. Quietly. No heroic leap. Just movement. He was suddenly close enough that Keene could have tasted the metallic scent of his breath.

"If you stab," said Tom, quite calmly, "you won't just stab a man tonight. You'll stab the ship. And then you won't die because you were brave. You'll die because you were stupid."

Keene trembled slightly. So did the blade. I saw his eyes flicker: pride versus survival. And somewhere in the group was that sweet scent of blood that piques the curiosity of other men.

I stood there, felt my beard in the wind, felt the darkness without stars, and I knew: No matter how this night ends, tomorrow no one will be able to pretend that honesty is the currency here.

Blood pays better here.

Keene stood there with the blade, and for a second he looked like a man who finally believed he was real. Such a small piece of metal in his hand, and suddenly he thinks he has a soul. Ridiculous. But ridiculous is dangerous when it bleeds.

Tom was close to him, too close for theatricality, just right for truth. Keene trembled slightly, not only with fear, but also with anger, realizing he wasn't the hero of his own story. His eyes darted from Tom to Briggs and then briefly to me, as if testing whether I might still be susceptible to bribery.

I remained silent. Sometimes, being silent is the loudest thing you can do.

"Put it away," Briggs said again, calmly like a man who has already decided how many minutes Keene has left.

Keene laughed hoarsely. "You want to keep me down."

"I want to keep you alive," said Briggs. "You're just confusing it with that because you think too highly of yourself."

Keene spat out blood. It landed on the planks and glistened in the lantern light like a small coin. I thought: There it is, his first mission. It won't be his last.

"You're all the same," Keene said. "You just want an executioner. Someone to think for you, so you don't have to feel dirty."

"We already feel dirty," someone from the crowd said. "You're just new to that feeling."

A few laughed, briefly, harshly. Keene flinched, as if that had hurt him more than the punch.

And then it happened. Not in a big way. Not dramatically. Not like in stories where the sky opens up and everyone screams and someone calls your name. It happened the way violence usually happens: with a small mistake.

The man who had punched Keene took a step forward. He probably thought he had to say something now. He probably thought he was important now. That's the problem: as soon as blood is involved, everyone suddenly wants to play a part.

"Stop that crap," he growled.

Keene turned his head toward him, just a little, and in that tiny movement everything was contained. Keene no longer saw Tom. He no longer saw Briggs. He saw only the man who had exposed him.

The blade twitched.

A short, deep, quick, dirty thrust. No elegant fencing maneuver. Just in and out. Like an evil thought.

The man made a sound I wouldn't call a scream. More like a surprised gasp, as if someone had stolen the wind from his stomach. His hand went to his side, where the blood immediately warmed. His eyes widened. Then he shuddered, and I could already see him collapsing inside, long before his body did.

Then everything went haywire.

Men jumped forward, men retreated, curses flew like nails. Someone grabbed Keene's arm, Keene tore himself free, the knife gleamed again, and suddenly the night had teeth.

Tom was the first to actually act. Not because he was the bravest. Because he was the most level-headed. He kicked Keene in the back of the knee, just enough so that Keene stumbled, not fell. Stumbling is better than falling because it gives you a second to change direction.

Keene stumbled, and in that instant, Tom struck Keene's wrist with the heel of his hand. Not a heroic move, just a mechanic's touch. The knife clattered onto the planks.

It was that sound that made everything freeze for a moment. Metal on wood. A bell tone for idiots.

Keene stared at the blade as if it had betrayed him. Then he threw up his hands, wildly, and grabbed at Tom as if he could pull him apart with his bare fingers. Tom dodged, slapping Keene across the face with his elbow. Keene staggered, blood spurting from his nose again. He wiped it away, only to then look at how red his fingers were, as if surprised by it.

"You bastard," he gasped.

Tom simply said, "Yes."

Briggs stepped in now, not to mediate, but to end it. He grabbed Keene by the collar and pulled him backward as if Keene were a sack in the way. Keene struggled and cursed, but Briggs' grip was like a vise.

"Enough," Briggs said quietly.

"You can't—" Keene began.

Briggs didn't hit him. He did something worse. He pulled him to the railing.

The sea was black, and without stars it looked like an open mouth. Keene only realized it when the wind hit his face. Then he suddenly became still. Not obedient. Just suddenly real.

"You won't kill me," Keene whispered. There it was again, that old hope people pull out when they realize they're losing. Hope is like a last cigarette. It tastes awful, but it still offers a brief respite.

Briggs looked at him. "I don't want to kill you," he said. "Dead people are silent. You are loud. Loud is sometimes useful."

Keene swallowed. "Then... then let me."

Briggs nodded to the group as if gesturing for the audience to take their seats. "See?" he said. "That's your leader. He stabs a man because he feels insulted, and now he suddenly wants to live."

Keene wanted to shout something, but then he heard a gurgling sound behind him. The man he had stabbed lay on the ground, blood running from his side, warm, thick, and rushing. Two men knelt beside him, pressing cloths against his face as if rags could plug a hole in the world. The man was still breathing, but it didn't sound good. It sounded like a drawn-out end.

That made the crowd dangerous. Blood either makes men weak or fierce. On a ship, they usually become fierce, because being weak is an invitation.

One of them shouted: "Throw him!"

Another said: "He started it!"

One more: "Hold on to him!"

The voices became a tangled mess, and in that mess there was no morality, only a hunger for balance. People wanted the world to be right again. As if it ever had been.

Briggs raised his hand, and surprisingly, it became quieter. Not silent. But quieter. Because they trusted him to do it: bring order to the mess.

"Keene," said Briggs.

Keene stared at him, his eyes shining, and I saw: He didn't just hate Briggs. He hated him because Briggs saw right through him. Nothing is worse than being reduced to your true size by another man.

"You're going below deck," Briggs said. "Alone."

Keene gasped. "You're locking me up?"

"No," said Briggs. "I'll give you time to think about how stupid you are."

Keene laughed briefly, hysterically. "You can't lock me up. I have men."

Briggs nodded to the group. "Then they should come here now."

Keene looked around, searching for faces. His men. His followers. His fair play fans.

And then something really strange happened: Nobody moved.

Not because they suddenly became moral. But because they saw the consequences. A man who has just stabbed someone is not a good captain. He's a risk. And risks are best left alone when things get serious. That's exactly what I had told the follower beforehand, and now I saw it live. The world sometimes provides its own proof when it feels like it.

Keene whispered: "You pigs..."

Briggs pulled him a little away from the railing, but not kindly. "Below deck," he repeated.

Tom picked up the knife from the floor, looked at it briefly as if it were a piece of trash, and then put it away. Not as a trophy. As a warning.

"And the man?" someone asked, pointing to the bloodstain on the ground, to the body that was becoming increasingly pale.

Briggs glanced over. No pity. Just calculation. "If he lives, he gets double rations," he said. "If he dies, he gets a piece of cloth and a prayer, if anyone still believes in that."

No one laughed this time. This wasn't a joke. This was the price.

Keene was led away. Two men grabbed him, not because they hated him, but because Briggs wanted it that way. Keene struggled, but his strength was suddenly smaller than his mouth. Down in the darkness, the ship swallowed him up.

I stopped and looked at the blood on the planks. It glistened as if it were pleased. Blood is vain. It wants to be seen.

The captain stood there, pale and silent. His title hung on his body like a wet coat. No one looked at him. No one needed him. He was merely decoration now, a name without weight.

Tom came to me, quietly. "It's happened now," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"And?" he asked.

I looked again at the man on the ground. His eyes were half-open. He was breathing shallowly, as if he were negotiating with the sea. I felt this strange, cold thing inside me: no shock, no pride. Just understanding. That's how you pay here. Not with fair words. With warm stuff that runs out of you.

"And now," I said, "no one will be able to pretend that talking is enough."

Tom nodded. "Blood pays better."

"Yes," I said. "But it also makes you poorer. Not in your wallet. In your mind."

Tom grinned crookedly. "We were already broke in our heads."

He left, and I stood for a moment longer in the lantern light while men worked the bloodstain with sand and curses, as if they could scrape the night from the wood. The wind tugged at the flag above, and the tar mark fluttered as if it were having fun.

No star above us. No witness. Only the sea, silently devouring, and a ship full of men who learned tonight that honesty is only worth something if you can afford it.

And we couldn't afford anything.

The wind never lied

The wind was the only thing in this damned life that never lied to you. It didn't tell you tomorrow would be better. It didn't promise you'd come home someday, all dressed up, with a woman in your arms who still loved you despite everything. The wind just comes. It throws salt in your face, it tugs at your shirt, it whistles through cracks you didn't even know existed yesterday. And if it wants to kill you, it does it without drama. No trial, no verdict, no "I'm sorry." Just pressure. Just direction. Just the end.

After the night with Keene's knife, the ship was quieter. Not calm. Quiet as a dog that has bitten and is now pretending to be good. Men spoke less, but they saw more. They no longer looked only at plunder and rum. They looked at hands. At glances. At footsteps. They looked at the distance between a man and the railing, and whether anyone happened to be standing too close. Everyone knew now that it wasn't just the sea that would take you. There were also those who slept beside you.

Keene was below deck, somewhere in a corner where people are put when you haven't yet decided whether to kill them or whether you'll need them later. I sometimes thought about him, not out of pity. More like you think about a splinter still under your skin: it doesn't hurt all the time, but you know it's there. And eventually, if you're unlucky, it'll get infected.

The man Keene had stabbed was still alive. He lived like a bad joke: flat, quiet, heavy. He lay in a corner, his eyes open as if counting the planks to avoid thinking about the hole in his side.

Some men are tough. Not heroically tough. Just too stubborn to die. At sea, stubbornness is often the last resort.

Briggs was pacing the deck as usual, counting, checking, organizing. But something was different about him, and I noticed it because I'd learned to pay attention to such details. He wasn't more nervous. Briggs is never nervous. He was... more alert. As if the night had shown him that the rope he was holding was thinner than he thought.

Tom was Tom. He acted as if it was all a bad joke, something you just had to put up with. But I saw how his eyes often wandered to the men, how he mentally retraced their steps and paths. Tom wasn't a friend. Tom was a fuse. A fuse blows before the whole house goes up in flames. The only question is, who does it take with it?

And then the wind came.

It didn't come like a tender hand. It came like a memory. First a tug, barely perceptible, as if the sea were taking a deep breath. Then a stronger push. Ropes began to sing, that shabby song of hemp and salt. Sails bent as if stretching, as if glad to finally have work again. The ship came alive, and I noticed the shift in the crew's mood. Arguments diminish when the sea grows larger. When the wind speaks, many mouths fall silent for a moment.

We were heading for open water, far from the port that had given us our plunder and was now probably spewing stories about us. Stories are the second sea: they either carry you or drown you, depending on who tells them.

The sky was gray. No rain, but that threatening gray that tells you: It's about to get unpleasant. I stood at the mast, pulling on a rope, and the wind pressed so hard that my hands burned. That was good. Pain was honest. Pain was a language I understood.

Briggs shouted orders. Men ran. One stumbled, cursed, recovered. The captain tried to look important, but he was nearly blown over by the wind, and I had to stifle a laugh. At sea, every title looks like paper when the wind blows hard enough.

We hoisted more sail because Briggs knew we'd need speed if the weather turned. A slow ship is a dead ship. A slow man is often a dead man, too. It all boils down to the same thing: move or sink.

While we were working, I heard voices in the back. Not the usual cursing. A conversation. Short. Harsh. I turned my head and saw two men standing too close to each other. One was one of Keene's old hangers-on. The other was someone who had been standing by Briggs yesterday, like he was his shadow. Now they were facing each other, and I saw in their faces: the night wasn't over. It had only changed clothes.

I wanted to go. Not to mediate. To see who flinched first.

Tom was faster. Of course. He appeared among them like a ghost. He said something—I didn't hear it clearly because the wind was getting louder—but I saw the effect: The follower backed away as if Tom had put a cold blade to his throat without even drawing it. The other one stood still, but his expression was less proud. More pragmatic.

Tom then came over to me as if none of that had happened. "The wind is getting nasty," he said.

"The wind is honest," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Honesty can also be bad."

"Everything that is honest is evil," I said. "Otherwise, people wouldn't lie so much."

He nodded and looked up where the sails were billowing. "When it crashes, it really crashes."

"Good," I said. "Then at least we have a reason not to talk about Keene."

Tom glanced at me briefly. "Keene is probably talking to himself down there. That's worse."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because men who talk to themselves eventually start to believe they are right," said Tom.

I wanted to reply, but then the gust of wind came.

It came like a blow. The ship heeled slightly, wood creaked, and somewhere someone opened their eyes wide and cursed. A rope slashed against a mast, hard as a whip. A man ducked too late and took the end against his shoulder. He cried out, a short cry that died instantly in the wind. That was another truth: at sea, you can scream as much as you like. The wind swallows your screams and spits them out somewhere else. Perhaps at another ship. Perhaps at no one.

Briggs shouted again, louder. "Reef the sails! Come on, you lame pigs!"

Men grabbed hold, hands slid, tore, knotted. The wind tugged at everything, and I felt it scraping away the thin veneer of civilization. When things get tough, only instinct remains. And instinct has no manners.

I worked like a man possessed. Not out of heroism. From the knowledge that otherwise you're dead in seconds. The wind isn't moral. It doesn't ask if you gave someone a proper burial yesterday or if you want to be better today. It simply says: Can you? And if you can't, it says: Then go.

When we had half-reefed the sails, it got better for a moment. Not calm. But more controllable. Briggs didn't breathe a sigh of relief. He never breathes a sigh of relief. He just nodded once, as if he'd ticked off a number.

And then, when the wind briefly subsided, something happened that frightened me more than the gust: silence among the men. Not the usual calm after work. A tense silence. As if they had all simultaneously decided that they now had time to be human again. And human beings are more dangerous than wind.

I saw Keene's followers regroup, further back, near the hatch. Two, three, maybe four. Their heads were close together. They whispered, and the wind carried it away, but I didn't need the words. I knew the pattern. I knew that chewing over ideas.

The wind never lied, but men lied constantly. They lied when they said they only wanted fairness. They lied when they said they didn't intend to push anyone overboard. They even lied when they told themselves it was about justice. Most of the time, it's just about feeling small and wanting to make someone else feel small so you can feel big, even if only for a moment.

Briggs walked past them as if he hadn't seen them. Perhaps he had seen them. Perhaps he let them talk because words are easier to control than actions. Or perhaps he waited until they gave themselves away.

I stood there, feeling the wind in my beard, feeling the salt clinging to my hair, and I had to think of something I used to hear often at the harbor: "The wind is changing direction."

Yes. The wind is changing. But it's doing it openly. It's not hiding. It's not pretending to be your friend while it's already measuring you up.

The men were turning too. You usually only notice it when you can already feel the knife.

I looked up at the flag. Our emblem fluttered, black and bold, and suddenly it no longer looked like just a threat. It looked like a confession. We had given ourselves a symbol that said: We are ready. And now the world was asking: Are you really ready?

The wind answered first, as always. It pulled at us, it tested us, it pushed us in a direction we hadn't chosen. And I thought: If there's anything I can rely on, it's the wind. Not because it's kind. Because it's honest.

And honesty is rare. That's why she has such sharp teeth.

The wind picked up again, as if it had briefly considered granting us a reprieve, and then decided: No. Reprieves are for landlubbers. For people who believe the world has a heart. The wind has no heart. The wind only has direction.

The ship creaked louder, and the wood beneath my feet vibrated as if it were cursing. I gripped a rope, feeling its fibers live beneath my hand. Not in a pleasant way. Like something that could snap at any moment if you underestimated it. Ropes are like men: they hold until they don't. And when they break, they act like it was never their problem.

Briggs sent us up into the rigging because a sail was bent at an odd angle. "Up you go, you sons of bitches!" he yelled, and the insult was no longer an insult, more like a rhythm. Work has its own tone. I climbed up, my hands burning, my legs slipping, and the wind whipping in my face as if it wanted to spit me back down. I glanced briefly over the railing at the sea: a gray expanse, torn, foaming, as if it were deciding for itself who it would like today.

Up in the rigging, the world is smaller. Just rope, wood, wind, and the question of whether you'll get down today. You hear less from the men. That's good. Less talk. More truth.

I knotted, pulled, tugged, did what one does to keep a ship from suddenly becoming a coffin. Beside me hung another man, a broad fellow with hands like shovels. He said nothing, but his gaze kept drifting downwards, not to the deck, but to the hatch. To the place where the whisperers stood.

"You can see it too," I said.

He barely nodded. "Yes."

"Why is no one saying anything?" I asked.

He spat into the wind. The wind took it and made nothing of it. "Because talking costs blood," he said.

I thought of Keene's knife, of the man on the ground, of the gleaming red on the wood. "Blood always costs money," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But some people believe they are saving money by waiting."

We continued working, and down below I only heard fragments: a curse, an order, a short laugh that was immediately swallowed again. The wind turned everything into shreds. And perhaps that was his way of telling us: You're not as important as you think.

When we got back down, the deck was filled with that nervous energy you usually only feel in the harbor right before someone throws a bottle. Men were running, but not just for work. They were running to keep moving. Movement is a trick against fear. When you're walking, it feels like you're in control, even if you're just running in circles.

Briggs walked to the hatch and paused in front of it, as if randomly checking the condition of the planks. Randomly, yeah right. He was standing exactly where the Whisperers were. Two of Keene's men, plus one I couldn't place. That made it worse. Unfamiliar faces on a plan are like strangers putting their hands in your pocket.

Briggs said nothing. He just watched. And that watching was like a weight. I saw the three of them separate from each other, as if they'd been burned. One suddenly pretended to check a knot. Another wiped his hands on his trousers, even though there was nothing there. The third stared out at the sea, as if it were giving him advice.

Briggs said quietly, "The wind is getting stronger."

One of the men nodded frantically. "Yes, that's right."

Briggs looked at him calmly. "The wind is honest."

The man swallowed. "Yes."

Briggs leaned forward slightly. "Are you honest too?"

Silence. The wind tugged at the sails. The ship creaked. And in this silence, everything that was left unsaid could suddenly be heard.

"We're just talking," one of them muttered.

Briggs nodded. "Talking is good." Then he paused, and the pause was a knife. "But when you talk, talk loudly. So everyone can hear how stupid you are."

The man turned red. The other went pale. The third, the stranger, took a step back, as if Briggs had just seen his shoes and decided they were the wrong ones.

Briggs walked on without another word. No drama. No argument. Just that short, cold cut that shows you: I see you.

Tom stood by the mast and watched the whole thing as if it were a play he'd seen ten times before. When Briggs was gone, Tom came over to me and said, "They're soft."

"Softness makes things dangerous," I said.

Tom grinned. "Soft things mainly make you loud."

I looked towards the hatch where the men were dispersing to work again. "Keene is gone, but his idea is still there."

Tom nodded. "Ideas die slowly. Sometimes they need a few dead bodies before they realize they don't work."

"And Briggs?" I asked.

Tom shrugged. "Briggs always works. As long as it's breathing."

That sentence hit me like a nail. I could feel it in my head, digging in. "As long as he breathes." Yes. That's exactly it. Everything hinges on a single breath. And breaths are fragile.

The wind howled again, and this time rain came along with it. Not that gentle, romantic kind of rain that makes you melancholic on land. But cold, slanting rain that cuts your face and makes everything greasy. Wood becomes slippery, ropes become heavier, hands go numb. The wind never lied, but rain is its dirty buddy: it makes everything harder without explaining why.

We had to get back to work, faster, harder. Briggs yelled, Tom moved like a knife that knew exactly where it belonged. The captain disappeared—of course—and I only saw his back as he stumbled toward the cabin. He probably would have even run from the wind if he'd known where he was going.

I grabbed a rope, pulled, and the rope tore my skin open. Pain. Warm. Real. I felt the blood on my fingers, and I thought of the phrase that had been uttered that night: Blood pays better than honesty. Now I was paying, too. Only for a sail, not for a fight. But it was the same account. The account of the sea.

As I pulled, I suddenly heard a scream. Unlike the usual curses. Higher. More panicked. I turned, and I saw one of the followers—the nervous one—slip on the wet deck. His feet shot out, his body toppled, and he slid toward the railing, right where the black sea awaited.

A few men instinctively reached for him, but they were too far away. He clutched at a rope, missed. His face was open, not prim, not proud, just genuinely frightened. The wind pushed him onward.

And then something happened inside me, without me having time to think about it: I jumped.

Not heroically. Not with music. Just one leap forward, stomach on wood, hands out. My fingers closed around his sleeve, around fabric, around something that wouldn't yield. I felt his weight pulling, the sea gurgling beneath him, as if laughing.

"Hold on tight, you idiot!" I yelled.

He gripped my forearms, his hands cold, clammy, trembling. I pulled. My shoulders burned. The wood was slippery. The wind pressed down. For a moment, I felt as if the sea was pulling too, as if it had a hand.

Then Tom was there. Of course. Tom's always there when things get serious. He grabbed the man by the back of his belt and pulled him along. Two more men joined in, pulling, cursing, sliding. And then the follower was back on deck, panting, wet, alive.

He stared at me as if I had given him back his world. "I—" he stammered.

"Save your money," I said. "Your thanks are cheap."

He swallowed, nodded hastily, and rolled away as if he wanted to become invisible again as quickly as possible.

Tom stayed standing next to me, breathing calmly, as if it had all been just a quick action. "Why?" he asked softly.

"Because I don't want the sea to have anything to laugh about again tonight," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "You're sentimental."

"I'm practical," I said.

Tom laughed softly. "Practical is just another word for cold."

"And sometimes," I said, "cold is the only thing that keeps you alive."

Tom looked at me, and for a moment there was something in his gaze that almost looked like respect. Then it was gone again, like anything that could soften.

The wind continued to howl. The rain continued to pound. And somewhere in the chaos, I saw Briggs watching us. He had seen everything. The fall. The grab. The pull. The rescued man. His face betrayed nothing, but I knew: He stores things like that away. He expects them. He collects them.

The wind never lied. And it had just said something: Whoever reaches out to others in a storm shows that they don't just eat. Sometimes they hold on. And that doesn't make you better. It only makes you more dangerous in a different way.

Because then people start to believe that you are something bigger than hunger.

And faith, I knew by then, is the stupidest, strongest drug of all.

Women smelled fear

The storm didn't leave us dead, just tired. A tiredness that wasn't in our heads, but in our bones, as if the wind had turned each one upside down and put it back in the wrong place. The deck was still wet, the wood greasy, the ropes heavy as bad thoughts. Men wandered about like shadows with aching muscles. No one was proud. Pride is for people who don't know how close we came to death.

Briggs didn't let us celebrate. Briggs doesn't celebrate. He counts. He checks. He hands out tasks like blows. And he knew: After a night like that, you need a port, whether you like it or not. A ship that reeks of storm needs nails, ropes, curses, and time. And at sea, time is always the thing that's most likely to cut your throat.

Keene stayed below deck. No one heard him, but that was worse than screaming. A man who falls silent is either broken or preoccupied. Keene wasn't the broken type. Keene was more the preoccupied type, with a small, neat plan and a big, dirty ending.

So we made landfall again. Not the same port as before, but a different one, smaller, shabbier, a place where the houses look like they've been left out in the rain too often. Wood, stone, salt. A bit of smoke, a bit of fish, a bit of poverty that clings to everything like a scarf. You can't wipe poverty away. You can only make it smell different.

As we sailed in, our flag was flying high, black and bold, the symbol like a grin, baring its teeth. And you could see immediately what a piece of fabric like that could do. On the quay, people stopped working. Hands hung suspended in the air. A cart stood still, as if the horse had realized it wasn't important today. Men looked up, swallowed, pretended they suddenly had to go somewhere else. A few ran. A few stood frozen. And in between: women.

Women move differently when they're afraid. Men get loud or stupid, or both. Women wake up. They don't just look. They see. They look into your face, your hands, the aisle, and they know faster than any preacher whether you're coming to take. And we always came to take, even if we just wanted to get water. That was the joke: we couldn't even dock normally anymore without the air reeking of danger.

I went ashore with Tom and two others to get supplies. Water, nails, a few barrels of rum, because without rum, men start talking about conscience. And conscience on a ship is like a rat in bread: you only notice it when you bite into it.

They were already standing on the jetty. Two women, acting as if they were there by chance. Nobody is there by chance when our flag flies overhead. One was older, her face like an old sail that had seen too much wind. The other younger, but her eyes weren't young. Her eyes were old. Too old. These harbors age your eyes.

The older woman looked me up and down, not shyly, more like someone who'd seen too many men die to be impressed by a beard and dirt. The younger one kept a little behind her, but I saw her looking at my hands anyway. Always hands. Women understand hands. Hands do things.

Tom simply walked past as if he didn't notice her. Tom doesn't like eyes that see more than he does. I paused briefly because I sensed there was something in the air that didn't smell like tar.

"You're causing trouble," said the older woman.

"We are bringing jobs," I said.

She laughed dryly. "Work is something you do in the morning. You guys conduct funerals."

"Funerals are also work," I said.

The younger one grimaced as if I'd just offered her something disgusting. And that's when I realized: she didn't smell my sweat. She didn't smell the storm. She didn't smell the harbor. She smelled fear. And fear has its own smell. Not like piss. Not like blood. More like cold metal just before it's cut.

"You're scared," I told her.

She swallowed. "No."

"Yes," I said. "You're just too proud to name them."

The older woman raised her hand as if protecting the younger one. "Leave her alone," she said. "Men like you like to make jokes about things that other people eat."

I grinned. "I'm not joking. I'm just gathering impressions."

"You collect corpses," she said.

I liked that. Not because it was nice. Because it was true. And truth is rare enough that you almost want to stroke it, even though it bites.

Tom called from a few steps away: "Are you coming?"

"In a minute," I said, looking back at the younger girl. "Why do you smell so scared?" I asked. "Because you think we're going to take you?"

Her eyes flickered. She wanted to run away, but something held her back. Curiosity, perhaps. Or that dark instinct people have when standing on the edge of a precipice: to look down, just to be sure it's really there.

"You'll take everything," she said quietly.

I nodded. "Yes."

That was the strange thing: she expected a lie. She expected me to make excuses. To pretend we were just men driven by the wind. But I didn't lie. Not because I'm noble. Because there's no point in lying to someone's face who can already smell your death.

The older woman gave me a sideways glance. "You haven't been here long," she said.

"Long enough," I said.

"Long enough to believe you are something," she said.

I wanted to reply with some dirty remark, but then I realized she wasn't insulting me. She's observing. She's examining. Like Briggs. Only without knots and numbers. She examines with her eyes and her nose.

"You'll be famous," she said suddenly.

I laughed. "Famous? In such a hole?"

She shook her head. "Not here. Everywhere. Men tell stories when they're scared. They make you feel bigger so their fear makes sense."

That was a sentence that stuck with me. Because it was true. I had seen it: how merchants suddenly become polite, how captains suddenly pray, how men suddenly begin to believe in divination. They'd rather tell themselves a legend than admit that they are simply weak.

"And women?" I asked.

The older woman looked directly at me. "Women don't tell stories to comfort themselves. Women sense what's coming."

The younger woman said nothing, but she took a half step back, as if she were afraid of cutting herself on my beard.

I finally went on to Tom, but her words haunted me like a dog. Women sense what's coming. Men talk about it. Men fabricate lies so they can sleep. Women build escape routes.

We conducted our business. Water was paid for with things that weren't entirely honest. Nails were traded. Rum was bought, and the merchant pretended to give it to us for free, because he was afraid that if he didn't, we'd take the whole shop. Maybe he would have been right. Maybe he was just unlucky. At sea, it's often the same thing.

In an alley, a group of women approached us, three or four, heavily made up, too thin, too alert. They saw our faces, saw the beard, saw the flag at the top of the flagpole, and I felt their posture change. Not like men puffing themselves up. More like cats deciding whether to scratch or run away. One of them even smiled, but her smile reeked of panic.

"You are from the ship," she said.

"Maybe," said Tom.

She stepped closer, too close. "They say you cut men open and laugh while you do it."

Tom grinned. "People say a lot."

She looked at me. "Are you laughing too?"

"Sometimes," I said. "If it's worth it."

She examined my beard. "You look like you're not sleeping."

"I sleep when the wind lets me," I said.

She laughed, but it wasn't real laughter. It was a sound she spat out because silence was too dangerous for her. "You bring money," she said. "And death."

"Money smells better," said Tom.

"Not always," she said, looking at me again. "You smell like death. But you pretend it's just salt."

I actually had to laugh. Briefly. Because she'd caught me. Not in a moralistic way, not romantically. Just cleanly.

"Salt preserves," I said.

"Yes," she said. "And fear too."

There it was again. That smell. Not her smell. The smell that lingers in people's eyes when they look at you, unsure whether to sell you something or bow down. Fear softens everything. And you take soft things more easily.

As we walked back to the ship, those words were still in my head. Women could smell fear. And I suddenly understood something I had only half grasped before: fear isn't just something other people have. Fear is also something you spread. You spread it like rum, and it makes people stupid and compliant. Men then give you gold. Women then give you looks that say: I know exactly what you are, and I hope you overlook me.

That was power. And power is a dirty perfume. The more often you wear it, the less you notice how much you stink of it.

I paused briefly on the jetty and looked back at the harbor once more. The older woman was still standing there. She didn't look away. She looked up at the flag and then at me, as if she were reading something in me that I myself couldn't yet clearly see.

I raised my hand, not as a greeting, more as a sign of appreciation: You have eyes. She didn't reply. She only nodded once, slightly. And in that nod lay more truth than in a hundred captains' speeches.

When I got back on board, the ship smelled as usual: wood, tar, sweat. But now I also smelled something else, invisible, everywhere: fear. It hung in the corners. It clung to the ropes. It sat in Keene's silence below deck. It was in the eyes of the men who were trying to convince themselves that everything would go back to normal.

And I thought: Women can smell fear. Men pretend they can only smell rum. But in the end, it stinks the same for everyone.

Back on board, everything was back to normal and yet completely messed up at the same time. That's the beauty of habit: it puts a blanket over the filth, but the filth doesn't sleep. It just waits until you lift the blanket because you think there might still be some semblance of order underneath.

The men stowed the barrels, knotting, tugging, cursing. Rum was distributed like medicine, except medicine doesn't usually make your hands tremble the next morning as if they've

developed a conscience of their own. I watched them drink, and how the rum softened their eyes. Soft is dangerous. Soft means: open. And open men are easy to manipulate. Or easy to break.

Tom stood at the mast, watching the shore as if he distrusted the land. He distrusted anything that didn't float. I went to him and leaned beside him, feeling the wind in my beard, that wet tug that reminds you you're made of flesh and not stories.

"The women down there," said Tom, without looking at me.

"Yes," I said.

"They looked at us as if we were already dead," he said.

I grinned. "Maybe it's us."

Tom snorted. "Maybe. But they look different than men."

"Because men only look to see if they win," I said. "Women look to see if they survive."

Tom nodded slowly. "And you?"

I looked at the water. The harbor smelled of fish, of smoke, of poverty, but the sea smelled of the same old promise: Take it or perish. "I'll watch both," I said.

Tom laughed softly. "You're getting greedy."

"I'll be honest," I said.

"Honest is just another word for greedy," said Tom.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it was all just a prettier package for the same dirty stuff.

Briggs walked by, glanced at us briefly, said nothing. But he paused for a moment, as if testing whether we were conspiring against him. Then he moved on. Briggs sees conspiracies everywhere because conspiracies are everywhere. That's his talent and his curse. He lives longer because he's distrustful. But he also lives harder.

I went down towards the hatch, not because I wanted to see Keene, but because I wanted to hear. Below deck, you hear things that the wind carries away above. Everything lingers below deck: smells, curses, plans.

The air down there was damp and heavy. The man with the stab wound still lay in his corner, awake, pale, with eyes that had seen too much and now only wanted to count how many breaths he had left. Beside him, someone sat pressing a cloth to the wound, as if trying to hold back the sea itself.

"How is he?" I asked.

The helper looked up at me. His lips were dry. "He's alive," he said. "But he hates it."

I nodded. "Good start."

The wounded man blinked slowly, as if he had to recognize me first. "You," he croaked.

"I," I said.

He swallowed. "No..."

"Keene is alive too," I said. "For now."

The wounded man closed his eyes briefly, and I saw the turmoil within him: anger, pain, perhaps also that stupid question, why him of all people. That question is so popular. It gets you nowhere. At sea, "why" is a word that immediately sinks into the water and never resurfaces.

I kept going. Down there, behind some crates, was Keene's corner. No cage, no chains, just a spot where he'd been shoved like a stinking barrel. Two men stood in front of him, not because they liked him, but because Briggs had ordered them to.

One of the guards looked at me. "He hardly talks," he said.

"Good," I said. "When he talks, it usually gets ugly."

The guard grimaced. "He's looking."

"Looking is the worst thing," I said. "Looking means calculating."

I moved closer, but not so close as to make the guards nervous. Keene sat in the semi-darkness, his knees drawn up, his hands clean, as if he had only dreamed the night. But his eyes were not clean. His eyes were like glass, cold and clear.

He smiled when he saw me. Not in a friendly way. More like someone who wants to rehash an old argument.

"Well," he said. "The beard."

"Well," I said. "The knife."

He laughed softly. "You've smelled the country air. Have you felt like a king yet?"

"I felt like a man who wasn't starving," I said.

Keene nodded. "And did you notice?"

"What?"

"The looks," he said. "The women. The traders. That little tremor when you walk past them. You like that."

I said nothing. I didn't feel like agreeing with him. But he was right. That was the disgusting thing about Keene: he was a jerk, but sometimes he hit the nail on the head.

"They can smell fear," Keene said, almost tenderly. "Women can smell fear better than dogs. And you... you smell like you're making it."

I grinned. "And you smell like you're about to buy them."

Keene raised his eyebrows. "Buy?"

"You wanted leadership," I said. "You wanted them to follow you. But no one follows a man who trembles. So you wanted fear as a leash. You just forgot that a leash can also fit around your own neck."

His smile faded. "You've become wise."

"I just stayed alive," I said.

Keene leaned his head against the box behind him. "You think Briggs has won," he said.

"Did he?" I asked.

Keene grinned again, this time more broadly. "Briggs never wins. Briggs only survives. That's not the same thing."

"Survival is enough," I said.

"Not for you," Keene said quietly. "You want more. You want them to say your name. Not just whisper it."

I felt a brief flush of heat. Not from shame. From anger, because he was treating my insides like an open bag.

"You talk a lot for a man who almost went overboard," I said.

Keene laughed. "I didn't go overboard. I just stumbled. And falls wake you up."

I leaned forward slightly. "If you stumble again, Keene, I'll help you. Right."

He met my gaze, but his pupils twitched. He was brave as long as he still had hope that someone else would bleed for him.

"The women," Keene said suddenly, as if changing the subject because he sensed he wasn't winning on the blood issue. "Did you see the way they looked at you? How they kept their mouths shut, but their eyes screamed?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you know why?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Because we stink."

Keene snorted. "Because they know that men like us never come just to buy water. Men like us come because they have something inside them that won't stay still. And women notice that. They notice when a man is about to lose himself."

He said it almost as if he were expressing admiration. That made it even more disgusting.

"And what are you trying to say with that?" I asked.

Keene looked at me, and his gaze was suddenly calm, almost gentle. "That you have to be careful. Not of them. Of yourself."

I laughed briefly. "Now you're going to give me advice?"

"No," said Keene. "I'm giving you a warning. Because you're useful to me, whether you like it or not. You're a symbol. And symbols attract things. Good and bad."

I stared at him. "You want me to believe you mean well."

Keene shrugged. "I mean it wisely. 'Good' is for children."

I turned away because I didn't want to give him any more of a platform. Keene thrives on you listening to him. He feeds on attention like a maggot on meat.

As I went back upstairs, the fresh air hit me like a slap in the face. I paused briefly, took a deep breath. The harbor was there, the flag was there, the men were there. Everything was there. And yet I had this feeling that something was missing. Not stars. Not God. But peace. That true peace you only know when you haven't yet grasped that the world can spit you out at any moment.

On deck, a woman stood on the quay, closer than the others. Not the older one from the jetty, a different one. Dark hair, narrow shoulders, eyes like two nails. She stood there and looked up at me, without waving, without smiling. Just looking. And I sensed immediately: She wasn't afraid of me. She was afraid of what clung to me.

And because she wasn't afraid of me, she was more dangerous than all those who ran away.

I stopped at the railing, and our eyes met. She said nothing. But I knew what she smelled. Not just fear. Also opportunity. And opportunity sometimes smells just as sharp as blood.

The wind tugged at the flag. He never lied. And he just told me: This woman is no accident.

She stood there on the quay as if she'd been waiting for days for this very ship. Not dressed up, not dressed up like Keene, not dressed up like a merchant. More like a knife: clean, because it knows what it's for. Her eyes were calm, and calmness in people is often worse than shouting. You can categorize shouting. Calmness is a riddle with teeth.

I held onto the railing and pretended I was just looking out. I didn't want to show her I was interested. Interest is like a hook other people like to hammer into you. But she noticed anyway. Women notice these things. Men usually only realize it when they're already hooked.

Tom came beside me, looked down, saw her, and I felt him tense up immediately. Tom didn't like strangers who didn't reek of fear. "Who is that?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I said.

Tom snorted. "Then she knows too much."

"Or you don't know enough," I said.

He looked at me, briefly, and his eyes were harder. "Be careful," he said quietly. "Women bring trouble on ships."

"Men bring trouble too," I said.

"Yes," said Tom. "But I know men. Women are different. Women are like the wind. You think you have it under control, and suddenly you're lying on your back."

I grinned. "You're scared."

"I have respect," said Tom.

"Respect is another word for fear," I said.

He wanted to object, but he didn't. Instead, he stood still, as if guarding me. That was Tom. He wasn't guarding because he loved you. He was guarding because he didn't like to surprise himself.

I stepped off the plank. Not quickly. Not hesitantly. At a pace that says: I decide. The harbor smelled of fish and smoke, but closer to her it smelled different. Not of perfume. Of soap, perhaps, but not much. And underneath: something metallic. Not blood. More like determination. That's how someone smells who has had to flee too often and at some point decided: I'm not running anymore.

When I stood in front of her, she immediately said: "You are not the captain."

I laughed briefly. "Even blind people can see that."

"And you're not Briggs either," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. "You know Briggs?"

"I know the name," she said. "And I know your stuff up there." She pointed at the flag as if it were a sign on a pub door. "People talk."

"People are always talking," I said.

"Yes," she said. "But I hear differently."

I didn't like that. I liked that immediately.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She looked at me for a long time, as if she were weighing something up. "I want a job," she said.

"There's plenty of work here," I said. "But not for women."

She didn't smile. "Then give me one that's for men."

I studied her. She wasn't tall, not strong in the traditional sense. But she stood there as if ready to bite anyone who tried to belittle her. And on a ship, that's sometimes worth more than muscles.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I don't want to die in this hole anymore," she said. Her voice was calm, almost bored, but there was something like a scar in her words. "Because men in this port don't pay. They take. And they'll take me too if I'm not careful. And I'm tired of being careful."

I nodded slowly. "So you want to go to the men who take."

"At least you're taking from those who deserve it," she said.

I laughed. "Earned. You're funny."

"I'm not funny," she said. "I'm awake."

The word again. Awake. I liked the word. To be awake means: not to be surprised. To be awake means: to survive.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"That's unimportant," she said immediately.

"Then you are unimportant," I said.

Her eyes narrowed briefly, but she remained calm. "Call me what you like," she said. "Once I'm on board, they'll find a name for me anyway."

I liked that answer. It was honest in a dirty way. Not that pious kind of honesty, but this: I know how it works, and I'm playing along.

"Why are you coming to me?" I asked. "Why not to Briggs?"

She glanced briefly up at the railing, where Tom stood like a menacing statue. Then back at me. "Because Briggs wouldn't see me. Briggs sees numbers. Men. Wood. I'm not a number. You, on the other hand..." She looked at my beard as if it were telling her something. "...you haven't been around long enough to see everything as just a calculation."

That hit me hard, and I hated it. Keene had said something similar to me. Keene and this woman, so different, and yet they were both poking at the same spot. I wondered if that was my weakness: that I wasn't completely brain-dead yet.

"What can you do?" I asked.

"I can sew," she said. "I can steal. I can eavesdrop. I can lie without blushing. I can make bandages. And I can hurt a man if he thinks he can get too close."

She said it as if it were a list of household appliances. No drama. No pride. Just inventory.

I nodded. "That sounds like a sailor."

She shrugged. "I am what you need."

Tom called from above: "What does she want?"

I didn't look up. I just said loudly enough, "She wants to live."

Tom laughed briefly. "Then she should stay on land."

The woman looked up at Tom, without fear. "I'll die on land," she said. "Perhaps with you too. But at least with you I'll die moving."

Tom remained silent. That was a small miracle.

I looked at her again. "You know what you want," I said.

"Yes," she said. "And you know it too. You just pretend it's always just work and wind."

I felt the wind scratch my beard. "And what do I want?" I asked.

She took a half-step closer. Not flirtatiously. More like scrutinizing. "You want them to fear you," she said quietly. "But you also want them to see you. Really see you. Not just as a flag or a beard or a rumor."

That was too much truth for a harbor. I felt my body briefly want to escape, but I stayed. I stayed because I don't like to run away when someone tells me to my face what's crawling around inside me.

"You're talking too cleverly," I said.

"You listen too well," she said.

We stood there, and the harbor around us suddenly seemed farther away. I heard seagulls, wood, voices, but everything sounded muffled. As if this were the real place, and everything else was just a backdrop.

"If I bring you on board," I said, "you will be hated. The men will test you. They will want to touch you. They will insult you. Maybe worse."

"I know," she said.

"And?" I asked.

"And I will bite her," she said.

I laughed. This time, really laughed. Short and dirty. "You're crazy."

"Crazy is better than dead," she said.

I nodded slowly. "Wait here," I said. "I'm talking to Briggs."

"Don't talk," she said. "Just tell him you want it."

That was the next thing I didn't like: she understood how Briggs worked. Briggs doesn't like stories. Briggs likes decisions.

I stepped back up the plank. Tom blocked my path, his eyes narrowed. "You really want her?"

"I want to see what she's worth," I said.

Tom snorted. "Women are always more expensive than you think."

"Men too," I said.

Briggs was standing at the stern, as always, as if he had the whole quay in view. Perhaps he did. I went over to him.

"There's one down there," I said.

Briggs looked at me. "I know."

Of course he knew. That bastard.

"She wants to come aboard," I said.

Briggs nodded slightly. "I heard that."

"She can be useful," I said.

Briggs' gaze briefly swept over the crew, then back to me. "Useful is a dangerous word. Keene was useful too, until he pulled a knife."

"She is not Keene," I said.

Briggs snorted. "No one's Keene. Thank God." Then he paused. "Why do you want her?"

There it was, the real question. Not what it can do. But what it evokes in me.

I held her gaze. "Because she's not afraid of us," I said.

Briggs nodded slowly. "And that makes you curious."

"Yes," I said.

Briggs looked at me as if weighing something inside me. Then he said, "Bring them up."

Tom cursed softly, but he kept quiet. I walked down the plank, and the woman was still standing there, silent, awake.

"Come," I said.

She simply nodded, as if she already knew, and set off.

As she stepped onto the plank and the men saw her, the atmosphere changed. It was as if someone had put a new knife on the table. You don't have to use it for everyone to get nervous.

Women could smell fear. And now I would see if this woman instilled fear or if fear consumed her.

Cannons are honest bastards

On the first evening after the woman came aboard, no one said aloud what everyone was thinking. But you could smell it. Like sweat in a closed room. Men don't fall silent because they're being polite. Men fall silent because they're calculating. And for many, a woman on a ship is a problem they'd rather solve with their hands than their heads. Hands are our most popular language.

She walked across the deck without creeping, without bowing. Not proudly, more firmly. As if she had washed the fear from her skin, leaving only the bare essentials. Most stared. One whistled. One laughed too loudly. One said something stupid about "luck." Luck. On a pirate ship. That's like putting flowers on a grave.

Briggs gave her work immediately. Not as a welcome, but as a test. He pointed to sailcloth, sewing supplies, a pile of rags that would one day become bandages. No drama. No speeches. Just tasks. Work is the best way to accept someone without admitting it.

Tom stayed near her as if he'd just happened to be there. Tom is never there by chance. He wasn't attracted to her. Tom isn't romantic. Tom is just allergic to surprises. And this woman was a surprise with teeth.

I held back. Not because I'd suddenly become a gentleman, but because I wanted to see how the ship would react if I didn't immediately cast my shadow over it. A ship is like a pack of dogs. If you stop every growl at once, you'll never learn which dog will jump at your throat at night.

The next day brought us wind and a problem. A sail on the horizon, small at first, then larger. Not a merchant ship this time, not a fat beast with soft eyes. The thing was moving too purposefully. It was cutting through the waves as if it had an opinion. And ships with opinions are usually the ones that chase you.

Briggs stood at the bow and stared. He didn't say "enemy." He only said, "Too fast."

That was all. But that was enough. The men suddenly became more alert. Hands went to ropes. Their eyes shot up to the flag and then back out to the water. You could practically see the idea of "prey" fly out of their heads and the idea of "rope" fly in.

The captain came out of his cabin looking as if someone had pulled his ear. His face was that pale thing again, as if it were made of milk. "What is this?" he asked.

Tom said, "Trouble."

The captain swallowed. "We can leave—"

Briggs didn't even interrupt him; he simply ignored him. Ignoring someone is the most elegant way to disempower them. Briggs just shouted, "Guns ready!"

The word hit the deck like a thunderbolt. Cannons. Those thick, black bastards that never pretend to be anything else. A knife can be a tool. A rope can be a lifebuoy or a noose. A look can be love or hate. But a cannon? A cannon is always the same: it's a decision you can't take back.

The men ran to the gun carriages. Wood was loosened, covers torn away. Balls were rolled, heavy as sin. Powder pouches were hauled over. The smell of black powder is such a peculiar stench, as if the air already sensed that blood was about to be spilled.

I pitched in, not at the front, not behind. Right in the thick of it. I felt my hands grip the metal, cold, smooth, honest. There's nothing poetic about it. Cannons aren't romantic. They aren't even cruel. They're simply... consistent.

The woman stood at the edge and watched. She wasn't staring like a child. She was watching like someone who wants to learn where the teeth are. Briggs noticed her briefly, a glance, a judgment, and then he yelled: "Get down! Away from the railing!"

She backed away, but not in a panic. Good. Panic is contagious.

Tom came beside me as we hoisted a sphere into place. "This isn't a dealer," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"That's a hunter," said Tom.

I watched the unfamiliar sail approach. "And what are we?" I asked.

Tom grinned crookedly. "We are what fights back."

Briggs had the cannons aimed. Not all of them. Just enough to show we weren't just a flag. A flag inspires fear. A cannon makes holes. Fear can negotiate. Holes can't.

The captain whispered something about "crown" and "mercy" and "we should—", but no one was listening anymore. When cannons speak, every other word becomes an empty cup.

The wind shifted slightly, and our ship reacted like an animal tensing its muscles. The foreign vessel drew closer, and now we could see more: men on deck, movement, order. Too much

order for friends. Then I saw something that briefly made my stomach churn: they had cannons of their own, and they were already open, not concealed, not "maybe." Open. Ready. This was no chance encounter. This was a question posed to you by aligning the barrel.

"Damn," someone muttered.

Briggs heard it and calmly said, "Damn it is not a plan."

"What's the plan?" asked Tom.

Briggs didn't look at him. "Get closer. Then we'll shoot."

"If we get closer, they'll make a bang too," said Tom.

Briggs nodded. "Yes."

That was Briggs. No hope. No lie. Just: Yes. That's how it is.

I felt my heart. Not faster, more like harder. As if it were contracting to avoid feeling too much. I thought of the man with the wound down below. Of Keene in the darkness. Of the woman on deck, just realizing that her new life might just be another death. And I thought: Guns are honest bastards. They don't make promises. They only deliver consequences.

The foreign ship veered slightly, as if showing us its belly. Not out of friendship. From an angle. From mathematics. At sea, mathematics is often more deadly than hatred.

"Ready!" yelled Briggs.

Powder in. Ball in. Plug. Touch hole. Everything fast, everything practiced, but with every movement you feel: This isn't a drill. This is your name now.

I stood beside a cannon so old it had probably killed more men than I could count. I briefly placed my hand on the barrel. Cold metal. It felt like reality.

"On my signal," said Briggs.

No one spoke. Not even the jokers. Humor is great until the end smells of gunpowder.

The woman stood further back, between boxes, her eyes fixed on us. Not pleading. Not praying. Just awake. And I realized: she no longer smelled fear. She smelled decisiveness. That was better.

The alien ship came within range. You could see faces. Eyes. Mouths. Teeth. One of them pointed at our flag. I saw his face harden briefly, like a man who realizes he's about to become part of a story he isn't writing.

Briggs raised his hand.

And I thought: Now the cannon is telling the truth that none of us want to say out loud.

Briggs' hand hung in the air, and for a moment the world was so still I could even hear the wood breathing. The creaking of the planks, the soft squeak of a block, somewhere a drop of rainwater falling from an edge. Everything was waiting for that one small sign, as if it were creation's last damned command.

Then he dropped his hand.

The first cannon spewed fire, and the air suddenly became a beast, slapping you in the face. The bang wasn't a sound, it was a jolt. It ripped through my chest as if someone had driven a fist into my heart. Smoke billowed from the opening, gray, thick, acrid. The smell of gunpowder is like a memory you didn't want: metallic, dirty, final.

The cannonball flew out, and you couldn't follow it. You didn't hear it. You didn't see it. You only saw the damage it caused. Over on the foreign ship, just below the railing, wood split open like a breast being ripped open. Splinters flew, men fell as if their legs had been swept away. No scream lasts long. The wind swallows screams. The cannon simply devours them before they can be heard.

"Reload!" Briggs yelled, and immediately there was movement again. Hands on, powder in, bullet in, tuck in, twist, pull. Everything fast, everything dirty, everything without drama. You don't have time to think about morality when you're trying not to end up as a red stain on your own deck.

They answered over there.

I saw the flash first, then I heard the bang. A spark, a brief flickering moment, and then the bullet came like a judgment. It struck our ship from the side, so deep that the wood groaned as if it wanted to scream but couldn't. A plank snapped, splinters flew across the deck, one of the men took a wooden wedge to the thigh. He screamed now, a high-pitched, disgusting sound, because pain is honest and has no manners.

The ship lurched as if it had briefly twitched. I felt the tremor in my knees. The wind whistled through the new crack, and the crack sounded like a menacing whistle: One more hit, and you'll be swimming.

"Hold the line!" Briggs yelled. "Don't turn!"

The captain, somewhere behind us, made a noise that sounded like a stifled prayer. No one listened. In that moment, a captain is just another body you'll have to count later.

Tom was by my side, his eyes narrowed, his mouth hard. He wasn't grinning anymore. This was the real Tom. No joke, no pose. Just that look that said: I'm here because I'm not dead yet, and I intend to keep it that way.

"This will be tight," he said.

"Close is good," I said. "Then we'll be more accurate."

Tom gave a short laugh, but it wasn't laughter. It was just air that needed to be released.

Briggs let us get closer, so close you could see faces over there, distorted in the smoke, men with open mouths, men stooping, men pressing their hands to wounds as if hands could mend the world. I saw an officer, clean-cut, dapper, shouting and waving as if he could wave death away. Death doesn't wave. Death comes.

"Fire!" Briggs shouted again.

Our next volley ripped their side open. This time higher. Wood splintered, a railing snapped, and a man was simply ripped from the edge as if he'd been a bad idea. He didn't fly gracefully. He toppled. The sea took him without a word. No hero. No farewell. Just gone.

Over there they banged again, and this time it hit us up top, closer to the mast. A rope snapped, whipped through the air, and caught one of the boys by the throat. It was as if someone had smashed his throat with a wet hammer. He didn't fall immediately. He grabbed his throat, staggered, made a gurgling sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Then he collapsed. Not much blood came out. Just that sound. That damned sound.

Cannons are honest bastards, I thought again. They make no exceptions. They know no names. They know no stories. They only know: there is wood, there is meat, there is air, and now there isn't.

I wanted to go to the staggering boy for a moment, but Briggs' voice cut through everything: "Don't stop! Whoever stops, dies!"

And he was right. Harshly, disgustingly right.

I pushed the wooden plug into the barrel as if I were forcing my own fear into a tunnel. My hands ached. My shoulders burned. The smoke settled on my tongue, bitter, and I suddenly tasted metal in my mouth, as if I'd already tasted blood without realizing it.

"Even closer!" yelled Briggs.

"You want to ram?" someone shouted.

"If it has to be!" Briggs roared back.

Ramming is the dirtiest way to end a conversation. There's no distance left, no space, no "maybe." Then it's just two pieces of wood hammering each other's teeth into each other, and caught in the middle are men too weak for the decision they themselves brought about.

The woman was still on deck. Among the crates. I saw her briefly, throwing a cloth to a wounded man, not affectionately, more practically, and then looking at him with a look that said: If you die, die quietly, I have work to do here. I liked that. It was cruel, but not stupid. Stupidity is the one thing I truly couldn't stand.

Over there, things became more chaotic. Their order broke down, you could see it. Officers shouted, but the men no longer listened. In the smoke and shrapnel, you hear only your own lungs. And when your lungs scream, rank doesn't matter.

Briggs took advantage of that. He waved two men to the helm, had the ship set so that we came at them at an angle, not head-on. That's the thing: violence isn't just anger. Violence is angle.

"Grappler ready!" Tom suddenly shouted.

I saw the hooks, the ropes, the hands ready to cross. Hand-to-hand combat. That was the moment stories were born. Not the cannon. The cannon makes holes. The man with the knife makes legends.

"Fire!" Briggs roared one last time, and our cannon spat as if it had talked enough.

The bullet hit the area near her gun port on the other side. I saw something flare up, briefly, orange, and then more smoke. Powder. Maybe we'd kissed her magazine. Maybe just the wrong spot. But it was enough: Two men there went up, not into the sky, but into pieces. An arm flew over the railing like a dirty fish. A head hit wood and lay there as if it were a hat.

Then it was our turn.

The ships came together, wood clanged against wood, a sound like a giant bone breaking. Men were now screaming, not just from pain, but from the sheer overwhelming force of suddenly smelling the enemy's breath. Grappling hooks flew, clawing at each other, ropes tightened. It pulled us together like two fighting cocks that can't be separated.

"Over here!" yelled Tom.

Men charged, and I charged with them, because standing still is deadly and because my body now only knew two modes: work or kill. I jumped over the railing, landed on a stranger's deck, almost slipped in the blood, caught myself, felt the strange wood beneath my boots.

The first one who approached me wasn't tall. But he had those eyes, those panicky eyes, and in his hand he held a short sword, as if it finally gave him some meaning. He shouted something, maybe a name, maybe a curse.

I didn't heroically knock the blade out of his hand. I simply kicked him in the stomach. Hard. He crumpled, deflated, eyes open. Then I grabbed his collar and rammed his face against the railing. Once. Twice. The second time it made that soft sound, not like wood. After that, he was silent. Not dead, perhaps. But silent. And silent is often enough.

There was movement everywhere. Our men against their men. Shouts. Curses. The scraping of metal. The sliding of boots on a wet deck. The sea right beside them, black, ready to swallow anyone who took a wrong step.

I saw Tom a few steps away, grabbing an officer by the jacket and slamming his head against a post as if hammering in a nail. Tom worked quickly. No hatred. No anger. Just efficiency.

Briggs was over there too. Of course he was. Briggs doesn't lead from the second rank when it really counts. He had a short hatchet in his hand, and he looked like part of a storm that had grown legs.

The captain? No idea. Probably somewhere on his own deck, praying, vomiting, clinging to life like a child to a skirt.

And then I saw a man from the other side glancing towards our side, towards our plank, towards our wife. He had that look I recognized: Prey. Not gold. Flesh.

He started running.

I didn't scream. I rarely scream. I simply ran after him, and for a moment the noise around us became unimportant. The man jumped over a rope, slipped, caught himself, and was almost on the other side, almost on our side, almost with her.

She saw him. She didn't back down. She pulled something from her pocket, small, quick. A blade. Not a large one. Something that would fit in a hand and into a throat.

The man was already grinning.

Then she stabbed him in the thigh. Not high. Not fatally. Right where it hurts, where you suddenly can't run anymore, no matter how much you want to. He screamed, buckled, and in that same second she kicked him in the face as if he were a door she was trying to slam shut.

He fell backward, gasping for breath, and she stood over him, breathing calmly. Awake.

I paused briefly, and I realized something I didn't like flashed through my mind: respect. Real respect. Not the kind for titles. The kind for teeth.

The wind whistled across the chaos, and amidst the blood, smoke, and wood, I understood again: cannons are honest bastards, yes. But sometimes it's not the cannons that tell you who you are.

Sometimes it is a person who doesn't scream when death is running towards them, but simply stabs.

The guy lay there, gasping for breath, his face half in the dirt, and the woman stood over him as if she'd just swatted a fly. No trembling. No "Oh God." No screaming. Just that look: Try it again, and you'll eat wood. That wasn't a hero. That was someone who understood that on a deck, pity is just another name for "break me."

I walked past her without saying a word. Not because I didn't want to say anything. Because words are like toys in that moment. And we didn't have time for toys.

The foreign deck was a slaughterhouse, only there was no butcher to work cleanly. Boots slipped everywhere, blood smeared across wood, metal clanged everywhere, and the wind rustled through the smoke like a drunkard searching for the exit. I could still taste gunpowder on my tongue. It was as if someone had forced an iron coin into my mouth and said: Buy yourself a life with this.

A man approached me, broad-shouldered, axe in hand, foam at the mouth, eyes like two nails. He didn't shout; he was already beyond the shout. He was in that silent realm where only killing matters, because everything else is too complicated. I didn't back down. I had no

sword, no neat plan. I had a pole, a piece of rope, my hands, and a mind that had learned you take the air first, then the rest.

As he swung, I kicked him in the front knee, right where the world gives way for a moment. He stumbled, the axe came too low, striking the deck without sparking. I grabbed him by the throat, not gracefully, not cleanly, just firmly. His skin was wet with rain and sweat. He smelled of fear, but he didn't want to know. I pushed him down until his mouth kissed the wood. Then I rammed the edge of the pole into the back of his head. Once. Not too hard, not too soft. Just enough for his body to decide: Pause. He slumped, and I left him there. Life or death, I didn't care. The main thing was that he was out of the way.

Further back I saw Briggs. He wasn't moving like a berserker. He was moving like a bill writing itself. Two steps, strike, one falls. Turn, grip, one falls. A little blood. A little wood. All in time. Briggs wasn't angry. Briggs was efficient. And efficiency is the coldest form of violence.

Tom was somewhere to the left, and I heard him laugh—that short, broken laugh that always comes when he feels death is just close enough to kiss his neck. An officer went down with him, not because Tom was stronger, but because Tom decided faster. At sea, the one who thinks less often wins.

The men from the foreign ship didn't last long. That's the thing: order looks good until it breaks. Then it's just a corset that crushes your ribs when you try to breathe. Their officers shouted orders, but orders are just air. Knives are metal. And metal is more convincing.

A few tried to jump. Stupid. The sea isn't an escape route, it's just another kind of grave. One jumped anyway, and I briefly saw his body disappear into the spray. No hero. No drama. Just gone. Maybe he survived. Probably not. The sea is patient. It takes its time so you can taste a glimmer of hope.

At some point, the atmosphere changed. You can tell when a fight turns. Suddenly you hear less clanging metal and more breathing. Suddenly, some aren't shouting for attack anymore, but for loss. Suddenly, steps are taken backward. Backward is the direction of the losers.

Briggs roared: "Down with your weapons! Anyone still standing, kneel!"

A few knelt. A few stood stubbornly, their pride clouded. They didn't stand there long. One of ours slapped someone's hand away so hard his fingers almost flew off. The man howled, staring at his hand as if it were offended. Then he knelt too. People learn quickly when the price is high enough.

I went across the deck, looking for the one in charge. You can't always recognize him by his clothes. Sometimes it's just the way others look at him. Fear has a center. I found him near the cabin: a man with a clean jacket, now dirty, face gray, eyes wild. He was holding a pistol, but he was shaking so much that it looked more like an accident than a sign of danger.

"No!" he shouted as I approached. His voice was high-pitched. A man who has lost too much in too short a time sounds like a boy.

I stopped, not out of respect, but because I wanted to see if he would actually pull the trigger. He didn't. Of course not. He just wanted his fear to be expressed through sound.

"Put that away," I said.

"You... you are pirates," he exclaimed, as if he had just invented medicine.

"No," I said. "We are bills that need to be paid."

He blinked. "You will be hanged."

"Maybe," I said. "But not today."

Behind me came Briggs, calm as ever, and when the officer saw him, something inside him crumbled. That was interesting. I wasn't the one who frightened him most. Briggs was the one who frightened him most. Because Briggs didn't look like anger. Briggs looked like judgment.

"Captain?" Briggs asked.

The man nodded hastily. "Yes. I... I—"

"Shut up," said Briggs. Not loudly. Just as if he were stopping a disturbing noise.

The captain swallowed and lowered the pistol slowly, as if he hated himself for having raised it in the first place. Briggs stepped closer and took the pistol from his hand, calmly, as if taking a toy away from a child who couldn't play with it.

"You're from the Crown?" Tom asked from somewhere, spitting blood from the corner of his mouth as if it were rum.

The captain nodded again, too quickly. "We... we are... tasked—"

"Tasked to catch us," said Tom, laughing. "Poor execution."

Briggs looked at the deck, at the dead, at the wounded, at the tattered planks. Then he looked back at the captain. "How many more ships?" he asked.

The captain hesitated. Briggs did nothing. No threat. No blow. He just looked. That look was the threat.

"Two," whispered the captain. "Maybe three. In that area."

Briggs nodded. "Names?"

"I—"

Briggs leaned forward slightly. "If you're lying, I'll throw you into the sea. Not because of pride. Because of time."

The captain swallowed hard, and suddenly he was honest, because honesty here wasn't a moral issue, but a practical one. He named names, routes, ports, and rumors. He spat out information as if he could save his own skin.

Meanwhile, our men ran across the ship, gathering weapons, bandaging wounds, counting the dead. One of us lay with the rope imprint on his neck, dead or nearly dead, I didn't know. The one with the wooden wedge in his thigh was still cursing, so he was alive. Life sometimes sounds like cursing. That was fitting.

The woman came across the deck, saw the wounded, knelt beside one of them, and pressed a cloth to his shoulder without asking if he deserved it. She did it because it was work. And work is the only religion that truly works here.

A few of our men stared at her. No longer with that greedy look from the beginning. More with uncertainty. Uncertainty is good. Uncertainty means: they don't know if they should dare. They had seen her sting. And that changes things. A person who bites suddenly isn't a piece of furniture anymore.

I walked past her. She glanced up at me briefly. No smile. Just a look that asked: So? Am I still alive? I nodded once. That was all it took.

Briggs ordered the enemy ship plundered and, if possible, taken aboard. A prize. More cannons. More gunpowder. More timber. More trouble. But also more protection. At sea, more usually means harder to kill.

As we opened the crates, I heard the muffled groan of a wounded man somewhere, and I thought: That's the truth of guns. No talk, no "I didn't want to," no "I had to." Just flesh realizing it's flesh. Guns are honest bastards. They shatter your illusion that you have anything in your hands except time.

Later, when the smoke cleared and the rain eased, I stood at the edge of the unfamiliar deck and looked out to sea. The water was just water again. It always is. It creates a brief drama, claims a few lives, and then looks like a postcard again, if you're foolish enough to see it that way.

Tom came beside me, wiping blood from his forearm. "We've got it," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Briggs has it," Tom corrected.

I glanced over at Briggs, watching him give instructions, counting, once again building order out of blood, as if it were his craft. "He always does," I said.

Tom nodded. "And you? What's wrong?"

I thought of the moment the cannon spoke. Of the boy who died on the rope. Of the officer who trembled. Of the woman who stabbed and didn't scream. Of the wind that didn't lie.

"I've learned," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "What?"

I looked him briefly in the eyes. "That if you want the world to be honest, sometimes you have to force it to open its mouth."

Tom laughed softly. "You're becoming quite poetic."

"Shut your mouth," I said.

He laughed again, briefly, and then became serious again. "Word will get around about this," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Everything gets around."

Tom looked at the flag fluttering above our ship, black as a curse. "And every time," he said, "they come with bigger cannons."

I nodded. "Then we'll bring greater honesty."

The wind swept across the deck, offering no comfort, only movement. No stars above us, no hand to guide us. Only wood, blood, salt, and the damned realization that you don't have to be good at sea.

You just have to be quick.

And ready.

God never came on board

There are men who speak of God as if he were a uniformed officer who'd just looked away for a moment. As if he were about to come around the corner, give a stern look, pull out a few culprits, and then everything would be right again. I've seen men like that. At the harbor, in the dirt, with a cross around their necks and one hand in someone else's pocket. At sea, these men grow quieter. Not because they become wiser. Because the wind is louder.

After the fight, everything smelled of smoke and damp wood, and that metallic taste that clings to your tongue, like biting into a coin that had been stuck in someone's stomach. The sea was calm again, as if it had never screamed. The sea has no memory. It only has hunger. We, on the other hand, had memory, and it clung to us like tar.

We dragged the pinch beside us like a half-drowned animal. More cannons, more powder, more trouble. More reasons for someone to slit our throats someday. Briggs was satisfied in his dissatisfied way. Satisfaction with him looks like a hook just catching in wood again. He counted and commanded and acted as if blood were just a type of water that smells worse.

Below lay the man Keene had stabbed, still not dead, but not really alive either. He was in some kind of in-between state, the kind God supposedly hates. Maybe that's true. Maybe God is just selective. Maybe he's simply never there.

The woman—the knife with eyes—worked without a break. She stuffed cloths into wounds as if mending holes in sacks. She didn't ask for names, didn't ask for stories. She just pressed, bandaged, cut fabric, knotted. Once I saw her bare her teeth at a man because, while she was changing his bandage, he reached out to her, not out of pain, but out of that "I'm allowed"

reflex. She slowly laid his wrist back and said something quietly that I didn't hear, but I saw the effect: his hand stayed where it was. Some men learn faster when a woman doesn't ask.

The captain, our title on paper, stood at the railing, staring into the void as if he'd lost a spark of dignity somewhere out there. Perhaps he'd never had it. At some point, he murmured a prayer. Nothing grand, nothing beautiful. Just a half-forgotten phrase, spat out when you don't know what to do with your fear.

I heard it and had to laugh. Not in a friendly way. More like when someone tells you they have a plan while the house is already on fire.

He turned to me, his face sweaty and pale. "Don't you have any faith?" he asked.

I looked at him. "Believe?" I said. "In what? That the sea loves us?"

"To God," he said, his gaze pleading. He wanted me to give him something soft. People crave softness when they're broken. Softness is like rum for the heart. And just as deceitful.

I spat over the railing. "God never came on board," I said. "He stands on the quay and holds his nose up. He doesn't like men who smell of tar."

The captain flinched as if I'd punched him in the face. "You talk like a madman."

"We are damned," I said. "We only keep driving so it's not so quiet."

He shook his head. "You'll end up like—"

"Like who?" I interrupted. "Like everyone? In the water? In the mud? Under a stone with a name that no one spells correctly?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Words are like thin ropes for men like that: pretty, but not strong enough to hold their weight.

Tom stepped forward, smelling of blood and smoke, and grinned crookedly. "If God ever came aboard," said Tom, "he'd vomit over the railing after two minutes and leave again."

The captain stared at him. "You're mocking him."

Tom shrugged. "Mockery is the only thing that won't drown us."

Briggs came by, probably heard the word God, and didn't flinch. He believed in nothing but weight and direction. "Enough of the nonsense," he simply said. "We have work."

The captain wanted to protest, but Briggs had already moved on. That was it. The captain was left behind like an unpaid bill.

Later, as darkness fell, the team sat in small groups. Some drank, others stared into space. One held a small wooden cross and rubbed it between his fingers as if trying to draw the splinters from his soul. Another knocked the cross away and laughed. There was a brief burst of noise, then silence again. That was how it was now: a few seconds of noise, then that silence again, the kind that tastes of death.

I sat down on a crate, my back against the wood, and listened. Not to the words. To the gaps between them. In the gaps, you hear what's really going on.

One said: "We were lucky."

Another replied: "That wasn't luck. That was Briggs."

A third person said: "That was the wind."

Someone mentioned my beard as if it were a shield. I could have laughed. My beard doesn't protect anyone. It's just a shadow I've hung on my face to help others decide more quickly whether to run away. Shadows aren't a lifeline. They're just a trick.

The woman walked by, but didn't sit down. She stood still, looked at the men, saw the bottle, saw the cross, saw the argument, and I realized how she was processing it all. Not morally. Practically. Who will tip over when? Who will become dangerous when the rum is gone? Who will become dangerous when it's too full?

She paused briefly beside me. "You won't believe it," she said.

That wasn't a question. That was a diagnosis.

"I believe in knives," I said.

"Knives break," she said.

"Then I believe in cannons," I said.

"Cannons are louder," she said. "But they're just metal, too."

I studied her. "And what do you believe in?"

She looked out to sea. "I believe that no one will come to save you," she said. "That sets you free."

That was the kind of statement some preachers would gladly sell you as wisdom, only with nicer words and less filth. With her, it didn't sound like wisdom. It sounded like experience. And experience always leaves a scar.

"Free," I repeated. "Free is a big word for a woman on a ship full of animals."

She looked at me. "Then teach them that I'm not a piece of meat."

"I don't teach anyone anything," I said.

"Yes," she said. "You do it all the time. With your beard. With your gaze. With the way you stand. Men learn from you what they can dare to do."

I didn't like the way she said it, because it sounded like she saw right through me. And being seen through is like being naked in a cold wind.

"And what if they try it anyway?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Then they bleed."

I laughed softly. "You fit in here."

"No," she said. "I don't fit in anywhere. That's the point."

She walked on, and I stayed seated. The phrase kept repeating itself in my head: God never came on board. I thought of the men who pray when things go wrong. I thought of the dead who fall silent in the night, whether they believed before or not. I thought of the stories that will be told later, so that someone, someone, can bear it all.

If there is a God, then he's a spectator who prefers to look away when things get interesting. Perhaps that's his only moral: Don't participate. There are no spectator seats at sea. At sea, you're always part of the action, whether you like it or not. The wind takes you. The sea takes you. People take you. And if you're not careful, you'll tear yourself apart.

I got up at some point and went to the railing. The night was dark, but not empty. You could hear the *Pristine* beside us, its wood creaking as if ashamed to now belong to us. Above us, the flag fluttered, black, tarry, proud. A symbol without faith. A symbol that nonetheless has more power than any prayer.

And I thought: Maybe that's the whole point. Maybe people don't pray because God helps. Maybe they pray because they can't bear the fact that no one helps. They need the feeling that someone up there is reading along. But heaven doesn't read. Heaven is just weather.

I stood there for a while longer, listening to the wind, smelling the salt, and feeling this hard, sobering thing inside me: If you want to survive, you don't need God. You need alertness. You need teeth. And sometimes you need the ability to laugh at what wants to destroy you.

God never came on board.

But death always comes.

The night after the battle, most don't really sleep. They just collapse like wet sails. The body shuts down to keep the mind from going completely haywire. But the mind keeps working, behind the eyes, in that dark space where you see things you brush aside during the day. Some mutter names. Some mutter God. Some don't mutter anything at all, because they've already learned that words don't heal.

I wasn't lying down. I was sitting. My back against a mast, the wood cold, my beard still reeking of smoke. The wind had died down, but it was still there, like a bad thought you can't shake. And somewhere below deck, the ship was gurgling, as if it itself had a stomachache from what we'd done out there.

A few men were rolling dice for a drink of rum, as if it were the last honest activity in the world. One of them was praying quietly, almost inaudibly, while he rolled. I had to grin. That's religion in practice: you're asking for divine assistance while simultaneously trying to cheat your comrades. If God saw something like that, he either has a sense of humor or he's long since left.

The captain resumed his circuit, uncertain, like a man who no longer recognizes his own ship. He stopped by me, probably thinking I was some kind of moral wall against which he could hurl his complaints.

"You are... different," he said.

"I'm wet," I said. "And tired."

"You have no..." He searched for the word as if he had lost it somewhere in a prayer book. "...no respect."

"Respect for what?" I asked. "For your title? For a god who covers his ears in a storm?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You'll regret this."

"I regret waking up every morning," I said. "And yet I keep going. It's the only thing we have here."

He shook his head. "Without faith, one becomes an animal."

"Wrong," I said. "With faith, one also becomes an animal. One simply gives the animal a name and says it is holy."

He wanted to reply, but then a box slammed shut somewhere, and he flinched as if the devil had grabbed him by the ass. He continued walking, offended and relieved at the same time. People love to be outraged. It feels like strength when you have none else.

I glanced over at Briggs. He was standing by the crow's nest where we had the night watch, inspecting damage as if it were all just a routine matter. Broken wood, fix it. Men dead, count them. Morale screwed, who cared. Briggs never had morals. Briggs had method. And method usually outlasts morality.

Tom came over to me, didn't sit down, just stood there as if sitting was already too soft. He looked out into the night, then at me. "You've annoyed the captain again."

"He was looking for me," I said.

Tom grinned. "He's looking for God too. But he never finds him."

"God has better things to do," I said.

"If God exists," said Tom, "then he is a lazy bastard."

I laughed briefly. "That's the kindest description I've ever heard."

Tom spat over the railing. "Why do they always talk about him?"

"Because otherwise they'll only hear themselves," I said. "And nobody can stand that for long."

Tom nodded slowly, as if I had just explained to him why rum was invented.

Later, when the moon didn't even dare to come out properly, the woman came to me. She carried a bundle of cloth, blood in it, and her hands were stained reddish-brown, as if that had become her natural skin color.

"The one with the stab wound," she said.

"Is he alive?" I asked.

"He's alive," she said. "But he has a fever. If he's lucky, he'll die quickly. If he's unlucky, he'll fight."

"Fighting sounds better," I said.

She gave me a sideways glance. "Fighting is exhausting."

"Life too," I said.

She nodded, as if she understood it like a bill. Then she sat down next to me, just like that, as if she had the right to. That made a few men nervous, I could feel it, those glances from the darkness. The glances said: Who does she belong to? As if she were a barrel of rum.

She still didn't smell of fear. That was the strange thing. She smelled of soap and blood and defiance. A mixture that keeps you awake.

"You said earlier that God isn't coming on board," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"You're right," she said.

I looked at her. "You sound like this is important to you."

She shrugged. "I prayed as a child. A lot. I prayed that he would see me. That he would do something. He never did anything."

"Maybe you weren't loud enough," I said.

She looked at me, and in her eyes there was something that couldn't laugh. "I was loud. I was so loud I got hoarse. He just wasn't there."

There was the truth. Nothing grand, nothing philosophical. Just a hole you look into and realize: nothing answers. People like to fill such holes with stories. They fill them with God. Or with hate. Or with rum. Or with a name that eventually sounds like a curse.

"And what are you doing now?" I asked.

"Now I'll do it myself," she said.

That was a sentence that fit better than any prayer. Do it yourself. Live for yourself. Bleed for yourself, if necessary. At sea, there's no other option. Whoever waits for help waits for death.

We sat in silence for a while. The ship creaked, the sea swallowed the sounds, and somewhere someone laughed drunkenly at their own misery. I thought of Keene, down in the darkness. I thought of how he could talk, how he distributed sentences like coins until they became knives. Keene believed in something, too. Not in God. In himself. And that was perhaps even more dangerous.

"He will come back," I said, more to myself.

She knew immediately who I meant. "The Clean One," she said.

I nodded. "He's not finished."

"Clean men are never finished," she said. "They clean until they eventually end up wiping with blood."

I grinned. "You have a pretty mouth."

"I only have eyes," she said.

Then something happened that showed me God really wasn't on board: One of the men, drunk and boastful, approached. Not directly at her, but in that sideways way men do when they're trying to convince themselves they're charming. He smelled of rum and bottled courage. His hand was already half-ready to grab something.

"Well, girl," he said.

She didn't react immediately. She let him talk, as if she were assessing him first. That was smart. You assess the danger before you show your teeth.

"She's busy," I said.

He laughed. "You are not her father."

"Luckily," I said.

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes sticky. "On a ship..."

I stood up. Not quickly. Just tall enough for him to realize: There's no conversation here. This is a boundary.

"On a ship," I said quietly, "you have to keep your fingers to yourself if you want to still be able to count them tomorrow."

He stared at me, and I saw the mental calculations starting to play out in him. Rum versus fear. Pride versus survival. He wanted to say something, something disgusting, but then he saw my hands, my posture, the beard, the darkness behind me where Tom was probably already grinning, and he opted for the only wisdom many men still possess: retreat.

He spat, muttered something like "asshole" and left.

The woman stood up and watched him go. "This will happen again," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"And one day you won't be there," she said.

I looked at her. "Then you're there."

She nodded. "Exactly."

There it was again, that thing inside me that I don't want to call soft, because soft is dangerous here. But it was a kind of understanding. Two people who don't pray. Two people who don't wait. Two people who know that the world won't save you. At best, you can only save yourself, if you're fast enough.

Later she went back to the wounded. I stood and stared into the night. The wind was mild, but it carried the scent of things to come. More ships. More bullets. More stories about us told in ports so people will lock their doors more securely at night.

I thought of God. Not as a source of comfort, more as an idea men use when they're too cowardly to face the consequences of their own decisions. Maybe he exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he's not a captain. He's not even a sailor. At best, he's a spectator on the quay, wrinkling his nose as we sail by.

And you know what? Let him.

We didn't need him. We had wind. We had cannons. We were hungry. We had this dirty, brutal certainty that nobody was coming.

God never came on board.

And that's exactly why we had to do the damn work ourselves.

The morning after, the dead were still lying there, as if they'd forgotten they were dead. That happens often. The body doesn't immediately know the party's over. It just lies there, exposed, heavy, offended. A man without breath is basically just baggage that stinks. And if there's one thing you learn at sea, it's this: you eventually throw away your baggage, otherwise it'll eat you up inside.

We'd lost three of ours. One was the boy with the rope, who'd been gurgling as if he was about to say something important, and then it was over. One had collapsed somewhere in the chaos on the other deck—a quick stab, a wrong step, and he was gone. The third... the third looked like he'd only been grazed by a cannonball, but "grazed" with cannons means: it still rips the world right out of your side.

Nobody wanted to watch it. But you have to. If you don't, it'll come back at night, only worse, because your mind will fill in the gaps. And minds like to fill gaps with shit.

The captain wanted a ceremony. Of course. He always needs ceremonies. Ceremonies are his way of pretending he has influence. He stood there, all prim and proper, even though his shirt was stained, and said, "We must... we must... their souls..."

Tom called out: "Which souls?"

A few laughed. Not because it was funny. Because they couldn't bear it any other way.

The captain glanced at Tom as if Tom were a problem that could be solved with a Bible verse. Then he looked at me, thinking I might be the new substitute priest who would take over his duties.

"You say something," he said.

I stared at him. "Me?"

"You are... you are a voice for men," he said. The word "voice" sounded like a poorly chewed lump of meat coming from him.

Briggs stood beside him and said nothing. He let the captain talk because sometimes you let people bark so they feel important before you put them back in their place.

"A voice," I repeated. I looked at the dead. At those heavy, silent faces. Some looked peaceful, as if they had finally found rest. Some looked surprised, as if life had just pulled the rug out from under them. "What can I say?"

The captain raised his hands. "A prayer. A word. Anything for—"

"For whom?" I interrupted. "For you? So you can sleep better tonight?"

He blushed. "For her."

I looked at the dead again. "They're already asleep," I said.

Tom laughed briefly, then fell silent, realizing that this was no joke.

The team stood in a semicircle. Men who usually yell, curse, and drink, stood there like children facing punishment. Not because of God. Because of the mirror. The dead are mirrors. They tell you without words: You're next, if you're unlucky.

The captain cleared his throat. "We... we're giving them back to the sea."

"The sea takes even without your permission," someone murmured.

I stepped forward. Not like a hero. Like someone who's had enough of this charade. "Listen," I said. And my voice sounded strange. Rough. As if the smoke from the battle had settled in my throat. "We're going to throw them in the water right now. That's the truth. The rest is just window dressing."

The captain wanted to protest, but Briggs raised a hand, and the captain immediately shut up. That's leadership for you. Not God's will. Just timing.

I continued: "If you want to pray, pray. If you want to curse, curse. If you don't want to feel anything at all, then pretend you don't care. But don't kid yourselves: no one is coming to clean this up for you."

Silence. Wind. Creaking wood.

“God never came on board,” I said. “And he’s not coming down now to pat you on the back.”

The captain whispered: “Blasphemy...”

Tom shouted: “Blow me the—”

Briggs cut him off with a look. Not because Briggs had morals. Because he wanted order.

I pointed at the dead. “They didn’t die because someone up there decided it. They died because we got too close, and because guns are honest bastards. And because every one of us makes a wrong move at some point.”

Someone swallowed. Another person wiped their face as if they had salt in their eyes. Perhaps it was just grief that couldn’t behave.

“So,” I said, “if you want to give them something, then give them the only thing that matters here: that you don’t pretend it’s anything other than what it is.”

I paused. I could have said something poetic. But in moments like these, poetry is often just a pretty rag covering the stench of death.

“They were men,” I said. “And now they’re food.”

The captain gasped, as if I’d taken a dump in his Bible. But the men... the men nodded. Not enthusiastically. Just... yes. Exactly. That’s it.

We tied stones to their feet. No coffin, no shroud, just enough weight so the sea wouldn’t play with them again later. The boy with the dew mark on his neck was lighter than I’d expected. That’s another kind of joke: when someone dies, they suddenly become manageable. As if life had just inflated them beforehand.

The captain actually muttered a prayer as we carried her to the railing. He muttered it so quickly, as if he were afraid God might turn around and say, “Shut up, I’m busy.”

The woman wasn’t standing in the front row. She stood a little further back, her hands steady, her eyes alert. She didn’t look away. She looked, very closely. As if she were aware of how quickly people transition from noise to silence.

As we tipped the first body over the railing, the sea made that sound, that dull splash, and then it was quiet again. As if the water had just briefly said “thank you” and then closed its mouth again.

At the second body, one of the men almost tripped because the deck was still damp. Tom grabbed his arm and held him tight. No comments, no laughter. Just holding on. That was new. Or maybe it was old, just long buried.

The captain suddenly stopped when he saw the third body. He clasped his hands together as if making a request. “Sir...” he began.

I said quietly, “He can’t hear you.”

The captain turned to me, tears in his eyes, real, dirty tears. "You don't know that," he whispered.

I looked at him. "Yes," I said. "I know because I'm here."

He wanted to hate me. You could see it. But hate takes energy, and he'd been running out of energy for days.

We threw the third body. The wind tugged at the flag. The sea devoured silently. The men stood there like a row of dirty statues, pretending they were still the same. But you're never the same again when you throw someone into the water and realize: That's it. No going back. No door.

When it was over, the group dispersed. Some went straight to the rum. Of course. Rum is the little god who at least responds when you beg him. Others went to work, because work is the only drug that doesn't make you drunk, but numb.

I stood at the railing longer than necessary. The sea looked the same as always. It looked as if nothing had happened. That's the cruel thing: the sea doesn't store guilt. It only stores bodies.

The woman stepped next to me. "You didn't say anything nice," she said.

"It's beautiful for weddings," I said.

She nodded. "And yet it helped."

"To whom?" I asked.

"To the men," she said. "Because you took away their lies. Lies are heavy. Truth is easier to bear."

I laughed softly. "Truth is difficult too. It just has less of a bow on it."

She looked at me. "You're not as tough as you pretend to be."

"Yes," I said.

"Then you're just tired," she said.

That hit home. Not like a blow, more like a finger on an old wound.

A sound rose from below. A scream, stifled, then cursing. Keene.

I felt my neck tense up. "He's awake," I said.

"He was never gone," she said.

Briggs arrived as if he'd heard our thoughts. Briggs always arrives when things might turn ugly. "Keene's calming down," he said, as if it were a weather report.

"Quieter means more dangerous," I said.

Briggs nodded. "Yes."

The captain stood a little way off, staring at the water as if he could conjure the dead back up. I saw him and thought: He'll cling to something eventually. To God, to a rope, to a lie, it doesn't matter. And when he falls, maybe he'll take someone with him, just so his fall isn't so lonely.

Briggs said: "We're sailing on. No break. No port. The crown will absorb the smell."

"And God?" Tom asked from somewhere in the back, again with that same dirty pleasure in teasing. "Is he coming along?"

Briggs didn't answer. Briggs doesn't answer God. He only answers the wind.

I looked out at the sea and felt the cold, clear core within me: If you're at sea long enough, you stop believing in rescue. You only believe in habit. In knives. In wood. In timing. And in rum, which makes the dead easier to bear, so you can at least look straight ahead without throwing up.

The wind picked up. The flag fluttered. And somewhere behind us, three men sank into the darkness, without prayer, without music, without the gates of heaven.

God never came on board.

And that was perhaps the most honest thing about this whole damned life.

Rum made the dead lighter

The rum came after the dead, like a second tide. First you throw men into the water, watch the sea swallow them without a word, and then some idiot turns around and says, "Who's got anything left in the barrel?" As if that were the natural order of things. First burial, then drunken revelry. First truth, then oblivion. And somewhere in between, you're holding on tight so you don't go under yourself.

I used to think rum was just a drink. A burn in your throat, a warm punch in the gut, a cheap way to turn your head down. But on a ship, you quickly learn that rum is a kind of tool. Like a rope, only instead of saving you, it drowns you. And sometimes drowning in rum is more pleasant than drowning in your thoughts.

The men didn't drink because they were thirsty. They drank because they no longer wanted to see the faces. The boy with the dew mark. The other, whose name had already faded. The third, who was nothing more than a hole in a body. The sea takes them, yes, but it doesn't take the image. The image remains inside you like a splinter. Rum is then the pliers you use to try and tear out the splinter, even if you take more flesh with you than necessary.

I watched as they passed the bottles around. One drank like a priest, his face solemn, as if it were a ritual. Another drank like a dog, greedily, smacking his lips, as if he had to gulp it all down right now before someone took it away. A third drank slowly, cautiously, like a man

afraid that if he drank too quickly, he would awaken something within him that he couldn't put back in its cage.

Tom was drinking too. Tom always drinks, but he never looks drunk. He's the kind of guy who drinks rum like he's tightening screws. Routine. Wrench in, turn, move on. I looked at him and briefly wondered if the guy even had a heart left anywhere, or if it was just a well-oiled knife at work.

Briggs didn't drink. Briggs let others drink. That's a difference. He knew when rum was useful. Rum softens men, yes. But rum also makes them tired. Tiredness is predictable. Grief isn't. Grief is like a storm with no direction. You never know who it'll tear apart next.

The captain wasn't drinking either. He was praying. He was praying like a drowning man thrashing about. It looked like willpower, but it was just panic. He stood with the cross in his hand, his lips moving, and his eyes looked as if he were searching somewhere in heaven for someone to blame, so he wouldn't have to look in the mirror.

The woman was working. Of course. She wasn't here to drink. She was here to survive, and survival is a sobriety that frightens many men. I watched her knotting the wounded, and I thought: She's not going to die from rum. If she dies, it'll be because some man can't stand the fact that she's not trembling.

Rum spread like wildfire, like a lie everyone wanted to believe. At one point, someone said, "They're with God now." I heard it and wanted to spit in his face. Not because I respect God. But because I respect reality. These men weren't "with" anyone. They were in the water, being nibbled on by fish, and if you're lucky, you eventually stop noticing because you're already dead. But men need phrases like that. "With God." "Better place." "They're looking down on us." All just words so you can keep tying knots without your knees going weak.

One of the boys, who hadn't been there long, drank too much, too fast. It always happens. The new guys try to drink courage into their stomachs and then realize too late that courage doesn't come in bottles. The boy was sitting on a crate, the bottle between his knees, and suddenly started talking loudly about his mother. His mother. On a pirate ship. I could have laughed, but it was too sad to be funny, so the others laughed for me. They laughed at him until he got angry, and anger is what carries grief, because it's easier to be angry than to be broken.

He stood up, swayed, yelled something about respect, and one of the old men slapped him, not hard enough to kill him, just hard enough to show him that his feelings were worthless here. The boy stared at him, tears in his eyes, rum on his breath, and I saw him consider pulling a knife for a moment. Then he saw the faces around him, saw the wind, saw the railing, saw the sea, and he sat back down. Not because he was clever. Because he wanted to live.

Rum makes the dead lighter, yes. It takes the weight off your shoulders, but it packs it into your head. The next morning you wake up feeling like someone's filled your skull with sand from the inside. And then the images come back, only with worse lighting. Rum isn't an eraser. Rum is just a silencer. And if you silence long enough, something's bound to burst.

I took a sip, too. Not much. Just enough to soften that hard edge inside me, that edge that says: You must always be awake. Always ready. Always ready to bite. Being awake is good,

but being awake consumes you. You can't walk through the night with your eyes open forever without eventually starting to see shadows that aren't even there. Rum helps against shadows. Rum just turns shadows into stains.

Tom sat down next to me and handed me the bottle. "So that you can become human again," he said.

"I was never human," I said, and yet I took a sip.

He grinned crookedly. "That's exactly why."

We were silent, took turns drinking, and watched the men slowly fold themselves into their corners. Eventually, everyone falls silent. Not out of insight. Because at some point the body has had enough, and so has the soul. Then the whole group lies there, breathing heavily, reeking of rum, sweat, and that bitter mixture of relief and shame.

A noise suddenly came from the hatch. Not a scream. More of a dull thumping, like someone kicking wood. Keene. He reminded us that the dead aren't the only problem. The living are worse, because they make plans.

A few heads turned. One said quietly, "He's crazy."

Tom replied: "He's not crazy. He's just getting cold."

I felt the rum briefly weigh down my stomach. Keene kalt means: Keene calculates. And Keene prefers to calculate with people, not numbers. People are like coins to him. You spend them when it suits you.

Briggs emerged from the darkness as usual, glanced briefly at the hatch, glanced briefly at the men drinking, and I realized: He was letting it happen, but he wasn't taking his eyes off it. He simply said, "Double watch." No drama. No lecture. Just one sentence that meant: I know what's going on here.

The woman came over to me briefly, took the bottle from my hand, smelled it, and almost imperceptibly wrinkled her mouth. "That won't help," she said.

"It helps," I said. "It just doesn't help for long."

She handed me back the bottle as if it were a dirty tool. "Long is a luxury," she said.

"Everything is a luxury," I said. "Even pain. When you're dead, you have nothing left."

She looked at me, and in her gaze was this stark, uncomfortable quality. "Then live," she said.

I laughed softly. "You talk like a preacher."

"Preachers make promises," she said. "I don't."

She walked on, and I took another sip. The rum burned. Good. Burning means: you're still here. The rum warmed through me, softening the air, making the world a little less harsh. And

that's precisely where the danger lies. When the world is less harsh, you become careless. Careless means: you end up lying in the water, briefly wondering how cold it is.

Tom leaned his head against the mast and said, "Tomorrow no one will talk about God anymore."

"Tomorrow they'll be talking about headaches," I said.

"And of revenge," said Tom.

I looked towards the hatch. The banging had stopped again. That was almost worse. "Yes," I said. "And rum will go around again, because revenge is dry."

Tom grinned. "Rum makes everything wet."

I picked up the bottle, weighed it briefly in my hand as if it were a small cannon. "Rum makes the dead lighter," I said.

Tom nodded slowly. "And the living are dumber."

I looked across the deck, over the slumped bodies, over the alert eyes of the few who couldn't yet sleep. Above the flag was only sky and wind. No God, no comfort. Only movement.

And I thought: Maybe this is the only grace we get. Not from God. From Rum. A short, dirty break before the world bares its teeth again. A break in which you can briefly forget how heavy a person becomes when you drag them by their feet to the railing, and how light they are when they fall.

The rum didn't just make the dead lighter. It also made the living heavier. Heavy in the head, heavy in the legs, heavy in the decisions. And decisions are the only thing separating you from the water on a ship. One wrong "Oh, it'll be fine" and you're nothing more than a sound, a brief splash, then gone.

The night dragged on like a bad joke that no one interrupts. One man snored. Another wept quietly into his sleeve, as if he were a child ashamed to still have feelings. Another told the same story for the tenth time about a port where he'd supposedly met a woman who loved him. Men like to tell stories like that when they're drunk. Not because they're true. Because for a brief moment, it makes them feel like more than just a pair of hands with teeth.

I sat there, bottle in hand, the rum keeping the world at a distance. Not far. Just enough so it wasn't immediately at my throat. The smoke from the gunpowder still clung to my clothes, and if I inhaled deeply enough, I tasted metal again. Always that metal. You can't wash death away. At best, you can drink it away.

Tom suddenly became talkative. Tom doesn't usually talk much, but when he drinks, he doesn't become soft, he just becomes... honest in a dirty way. He stared into the darkness and suddenly said, "The boy who was hanging from the rope... he still tried to say something."

"He was gargling," I said.

"Yes," said Tom. "Maybe it was his prayer."

I grinned crookedly. "If that was a prayer, then God is deaf."

Tom laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant laugh. "Maybe it was just slime."

"That sounds more realistic," I said.

He shook his head and took a deep gulp. "Do you know what pisses me off?" he asked.

"That you're still alive?" I said.

"That I remember," said Tom. "I thought I was way too cold for that."

The rum made him dangerous because it suddenly grabbed at things he usually keeps tightly closed. Memories are like loose nails. You step on them, and then you limp for the rest of the day.

"Then drink more," I said.

"More makes it worse," muttered Tom. "More only makes it... quieter. And quiet is sometimes worse than loud."

He was right about that. Quiet is when you're alone with the image. Loud is when you shout it away. Quiet is the moment you realize you were the bastard who did it.

Out of the darkness came the sound of an argument, somewhere near the hatch. Not Keene this time. Two men. One was slurring his words, the other sounding angry. Then I heard the woman's name, not really her name, more the word they had given her, because men can't name anything without defiling it.

I stood up before my mind could process it. My body knew the drill. Rum or no rum. When men start treating women like prey, things quickly turn ugly, and ugly on a ship usually ends in blood or silence, and both are a problem.

I went over and saw them: The drunk guy who'd already been hitting on me was standing there again, this time with two buddies who weren't even particularly interested, just curious. Curiosity is dangerous. Curiosity has opened more doors than anger.

He grinned broadly, the bottle half empty, his eyes half dead. "Come on," he slurred. "Just for a minute. Just so we can..."

She stood there, her back against a box, the blade not visible, but her posture was like a drawn blade. Calm. Alert. Without theatrics.

"Go away," she said. Not loudly. Just clearly.

The drunkard laughed. "You're on our ship. That means—"

I intervened. Not like a hero. Like a man who's had enough.

"That means absolutely nothing," I said.

He turned to me, swayed, studied my beard, and I saw the rum briefly fight against his fear. Rum is a foolish motivator. It tells you: Go for it. Fear says: Think it over. For some, rum wins, for others, fear. For him, it was a draw, and draws make people unpredictable.

"What are you thinking?" he slurred. "You're not Briggs."

"No," I said. "I'm worse because I have less patience."

One of his buddies said quietly, "Let's leave it at that."

The drunk waved him off. "Oh, shut your mouth. Beard thinks he's king now."

"I'm not thinking anything," I said. "I just see that you're being stupid right now."

He took a half step forward. Not really an attack, more of a test. Like a dog sniffing to see if you'll back away.

I did not budge.

He raised his hand as if he wanted to touch me, perhaps push me, perhaps grab me. At that moment, she moved. Not much. Just a small twist, and her hand was on his wrist, and she turned it so that he suddenly gasped like a man whose pride has been ripped from his arm.

"I said," she said calmly, "go away."

He almost whimpered. His hand turned red. No blood, just pain. And pain makes men honest.

I let her do it. Not because I was too lazy. Because I wanted to see if she could hold the line. She could.

He tore himself free, staggered back, and spat. "You bitch," he gasped.

The word hung in the air for a moment like a spark.

I didn't punch him in the face. I did something easier. I took the bottle from his hand and poured the rest of the rum onto the planks.

His face contorted as if I had slit his throat. "You—"

"Rum is expensive," I said. "But stupidity is more expensive."

He took a step forward, his eyes suddenly angry. Tom was there now too, silent as a wall. Briggs stood a few steps away, had obviously seen it, but said nothing. Briggs likes to let you reveal yourself.

"You want a fight," I said to the drunk man.

"I want respect," he spat.

I laughed, briefly, coldly. "You don't get respect here because you shout. You get respect because you live."

He looked at the woman, then back at me. He didn't want to accept it. The rum inside him screamed: Take her. Take what you want. This is your life. But something inside him, maybe the last vestige of reason, maybe Briggs's look, maybe the fact that Tom stood there like a gravestone with eyes, stopped him.

He growled, turned around, and left. His buddies followed him quickly, relieved that they didn't have to play the leading role.

The woman watched them go. Then she looked at me. No thank you. No smile. Just a look that said: This will happen again. And she was right. It happens again and again because men are stupid and rum gives them an excuse.

"You poured out his rum," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"That was mean," she said.

"What he wanted was mean," I said.

She nodded slowly. "Then we agree."

Tom stepped closer and muttered, "Now you've taken away the only religion he understands."

"He can pray," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Then he prays to the barrel."

Briggs came closer, finally. He saw the wet planks, the spilled rum, the receding shadows. "Good idea," he said. Nothing more. No threat, no praise. Good idea. For Briggs, that was almost a poem.

Then he left again as if nothing had happened.

I stopped and felt the rum stir within me, warm, languid. It made everything a little easier, yes. Even this scene. Even the dead. But it also did something else: it made me a touch less angry. And anger is sometimes the only thing that keeps you going.

Later I sat with Tom again. He handed me the bottle, a new one, as if the whole thing had just been a brief interruption.

"You'll end up being a babysitter," he said.

"I'm taking care of myself," I said.

Tom snorted. "It's the same thing. If the ship capsizes, we all capsize."

I took a sip and thought of the three who had already been in the water today. How light they are now. How heavy they were before. How much they talked, laughed, and swore. And now? Now they are nothing more than a rumor in the sea.

The rum settled over the images like a cloth. Not removing it. Just muting it. And I understood why men love it. Rum is the only thing that lets you briefly forget how thin the wall is between you and the darkness.

But he's also the one who will eventually make you run into it because you can no longer see the wall.

I looked towards the hatch, from which no sound was coming. Keene was silent. Silent means: he's counting. Silent means: he's waiting. And while the others drank to become lighter, Keene was probably waiting for us to be heavy enough to fall.

I took another sip.

Not out of joy. Out of strategy.

The sea forgives no weakness

The morning smelled of old rum and fresh misery. The kind of smell that tells you: You survived something yesterday, but your body is offended by it. I woke up to a bang. Not a cannon shot. A wooden bang. A dull thumping, as if the ship itself were trying to beat you out of your sleep.

My tongue felt like a piece of leather left too long in the sun. My head was heavy, not like a stone, more like a wet sack full of memories. I sat up, spat, and even the saliva tasted of smoke and regret. Rum makes the dead lighter, yes. But it makes the living lame the next day, and the sea loves lameness. The sea swallows them whole.

Up on deck, the action was already intense. Briggs wouldn't let the morning get soft. Briggs is the kind of man who doesn't trust even a sunrise. He stood at the mast, bellowing orders, his voice like a hammer on bone. Men stumbled, rubbed their eyes, cursed, and tried to look ready. Ready is a joke. You're never ready if you still reek of rum.

"Get out of your holes!" yelled Briggs. "Check the ropes! Mend the sails! And if someone throws up, they'll throw up later!"

One of them threw up immediately. Of course. The boy from yesterday, who'd been rambling on about his mother, was hanging over the railing, retching as if he were vomiting up his entire childhood. No one comforted him. Comforting him is about as popular on board as a toothache. One of them even kicked him in the side, not hard, just enough to make him realize: There's no time for your drama here.

The wind was back, not wild, but steady. The kind of wind that doesn't kill you, but constantly reminds you that it could. We moved on, away from the harbor, away from the gossip that was already clinging to the streets. The prize sailed alongside us, tied to ropes, and every time it slammed into a wave, it sounded like it was whimpering. A ship you've defeated always sounds like a dog clinging to your leg.

I went to the spot where the cannon hole had ripped open our side. A few men were already trying to plug it. Pieces of wood, tar, curses. Improvised living. Briggs stood nearby, watching, mentally counting how long it would hold.

"If there's another explosion, water will leak in," one of them said.

Briggs looked at him as if the man had just said he wanted to recite a poem. "Then there won't be any bang," Briggs said.

"And what if it does?" the man asked.

Briggs stepped closer, very calmly. "Then you'll swim faster," he said.

That wasn't a threat. That was a description. The sea forgives no weakness. Not yours, and not the wood's. If the planks give way, you give way. It's that simple. No God, no prayer, no "but I did." The sea doesn't listen.

I knelt down, felt the wood, the cracks, the tar. My fingers found splinters, and I pulled one out, feeling the brief pain. Good. Pain keeps you awake. Rum makes you stupid. Pain makes you smart.

"You're awake," Briggs said from behind me.

I didn't turn around immediately. "I was never gone," I said.

Briggs grumbled. He didn't like quips, but he tolerated them sometimes if they didn't sound like whining. "Today we work," he said. "No rum. No stories."

"And Keene?" I asked.

I felt the men around us slow down briefly. Keene's name was like a nail sticking through wood. Everyone steps on it eventually.

Briggs' gaze went to the hatch. "Keene is alive," he said. "That's enough."

"Being alive doesn't mean being quiet," I said.

"Calm doesn't mean safe," Briggs said. He looked at me. "And there's no such thing as safe around here anyway."

He was right about that. A word from the land is a certainty. On board, everything is just probability. Maybe today. Maybe not tomorrow.

The woman was on deck, too. She had bandages in her hands, a few tools—a needle, thread, something that looked like pliers. She went from man to man, not like a nurse, more like a handyman. She patched up the holes in us so we could keep functioning. Some men looked away because they were ashamed to be vulnerable. Others looked too long because they were stupid. But no one said anything. Not after yesterday. Yesterday she had shown that she wasn't just there to watch.

The boy who had vomited wiped his mouth and tried to get back to work. He acted as if everything was okay. As if he were strong. That, too, is weakness: pretending you don't have any.

He grabbed a rope, pulled too sharply, and the rope snapped back. It caught him on the wrist. He yelped, let go, and the moment he released it, the sail slipped a bit, the tension shifted, a block clanged, and another man got the edge against his forehead. Blood. Instantly. Warm. Fast. Like a little comment from the sea: You see? That's how fast it happens.

The man staggered, clutching his head, blood running down his nose. The boy stared at him as if he had just shot a friend.

Briggs was there in two steps. He grabbed the boy by the collar and pulled him close. "You won't let go," Briggs said quietly.

"It—it has—" stammered the boy.

Briggs shook him once. Not violently, more like straightening a sack. "It always has," Briggs said. "So have you. But you won't let go."

The boy nodded frantically, tears in his eyes, but he swallowed them down because he realized: tears are water, and water already has enough power here.

The woman came to the bleeding man, pressed a cloth to the wound, and quickly tied it tight. The man cursed, not because it hurt, but because he was ashamed. Shame, in this context, is also a form of weakness. And weakness comes at a price.

I saw the boy shivering. Not from the cold. From the knowledge that his body wouldn't obey him. Rum in his bones, fear in his gut. This mixture is poison.

I went up to him, not friendly, not harsh, just direct. "If you mess up today, someone will die," I said.

He looked at me, his eyes wide. "I didn't mean to," he whispered.

"Wanting doesn't matter," I said. "The sea doesn't ask about your will."

He swallowed and nodded, and I saw him force himself to keep his hands still. That was perhaps the first moment he truly understood what this life is. Not adventure. Not freedom. Just responsibility without applause.

Later, a scream came from below. Not Keene. The wounded man, the one Keene had stabbed. He wasn't screaming like someone in pain. He was screaming like someone having fever dreams. A scream that came from somewhere else.

The woman ran downstairs. I didn't follow. I stayed upstairs because I knew: down there it's damp, cramped, and if someone dies, they die. You can't talk them out of it. You can't beg them. At best, you can hold on to them so they don't go alone. And going alone is sometimes the only luxury a person has left.

Briggs turned the ship, just a little, to take the wind better. A few men grumbled, because they always had to complain when something didn't go according to their gut feeling. Briggs didn't listen. He listened only to the wood. To the wind. To the sea.

I stood at the bow and looked out. The sea was blue-gray, smooth enough to give you hope, rough enough to keep you in your mind. This kind of sea is dangerous. It lulls you into a false sense of security, then pulls the rug out from under you. Like a con man who smiles warmly before putting his hand in your pocket.

Tom came over to me, rubbed his eyes, and spat. "That boy is a problem," he said.

"The boy is a mirror," I said. "We are all just one bad morning away from being one."

Tom snorted. "Not me."

"Yes," I said. "So are you. You're just better at pretending."

He grinned crookedly, and I realized: That was his way of agreeing with me without admitting it.

The woman climbed back up from the hatch, her face serious, her hands bloody. "He won't make it," she said. No drama. Just a fact.

"The one with the stab wound?" asked Tom.

She nodded. "Fever is eating him alive."

Tom shrugged. "Then it'll eat him."

She looked at him, coldly. "Yes. But until then he'll keep screaming. And that makes the others weak."

There it was. The other truth. Not only does the sea not forgive weakness. Neither do men. They won't forgive you if you remind them of their own fragility. Screams make them weak. Weakness makes them dangerous.

I looked towards the railing where a few men stood staring into the water, as if they might find answers there. The wind tugged at the flag, and the fabric sounded like dry laughter.

The sea forgives no weakness. Not in the planks. Not in the hands. Not in the mind. And those who don't learn this won't sink romantically. They will simply vanish, quietly, nameless, without a star above them.

I took a deep breath, tasted salt, and thought: This is the price. Not gold. Not rum. Not fame. The price is that you get up every day, even when everything inside you screams that it would be easier to stay down.

And if you stay put, the sea will make short work of you.

The day dragged on like a wet rope. Everything was sticky. Wood was sticky, clothes were sticky, thoughts were sticky. And somewhere beneath it all, that invisible clock ticked, the one you can't see but feel: How long does a person last before they start making mistakes?

The wounded man continued to scream, down below, first in gasps, then more softly, then suddenly loudly again, as if the fever were forcing open a door and revealing something behind it he didn't want to see. Screams are like cracks in a barrel. First a drop comes, then it all runs out. Men hear things like that and go soft, even if they pretend to be made of iron. Iron also softens if you heat it up long enough.

I went to the hatch and paused briefly. Not out of reverence. Out of caution. The air is different below deck. Down there it stinks of people, of disease, of mold, of what happens when you block out the sun. Up top, you can tell yourself you're free. Down below, you realize: you're just in a floating box, and every breath belongs to the wood.

The woman was back downstairs, kneeling beside him, with cloths, water, a needle, and something that smelled of herbs. She was working as if she could sew death itself in place with thread. The wounded man tossed his head back and forth, his eyes glazed, and when he saw me, he suddenly grabbed my arm with a force completely out of character for him.

"Keene," he croaked.

"Yes," I said. "No one."

His fingers dug into my skin as if he wanted to pull me into his fever. "He... he's still here," he whispered.

"You too," I said.

He laughed once, a broken, dry sound. "Not for long."

The woman glanced at me briefly, and I realized: she hated this moment. Not because of the blood. Because of the meaninglessness. Meaninglessness is worse than pain. Pain, at least, is honest.

The wounded man pulled me closer, as if he had something important to say. "Tell him," he whispered. "Tell him to..."

"To whom?" I asked.

"Briggs," he gasped. "Tell him... the sea..."

He couldn't find the words. The sentence broke apart, like wood in the surf. Only fragments. "The sea... takes... the weak..."

I gently loosened his grip, not tenderly, just practically. "Rest," I said.

He stared at me, and his gaze suddenly held a clarity, brief as a matchstick. "I was never strong," he whispered. "I was just... loud."

Then his head fell back, and he began to feverish again, to murmur, to breathe, as if he were negotiating a step with every breath.

I went back upstairs because there was nothing I could do down there except watch. And watching either makes you weak or angry. Both are dangerous.

On deck, the work continued. Briggs urged them on, and you could see him beating the weakness out of them without touching them. He didn't need fists. He only needed the sea as a threat. "Faster," "harder," "again," "you won't let go," "you're tying like a drunken priest." His words were like nails, and the men became boards he hammered into shape.

The boy who had vomited was now working obsessively. Too obsessively. He wanted to prove he wasn't weak. That's exactly what makes you weak: wanting to prove something. The sea loves proof. It collects it.

A gust of wind came, not large, but sharp. The ship pulled slightly, the sail tightened, and the boy reached out too late because he was too preoccupied. His foot slipped on the damp wood, and he didn't just fall. He fell towards the railing.

It happens quickly. A heartbeat. An "oh". A cry that doesn't even come out properly.

He flailed his arms, searching for something to hold onto, but his hand caught nothing but slippery rope. The railing was already there, and beyond it the water, which looked so calm, as if it were friendly.

I jumped. Not because I liked him. Because I didn't feel like counting another body today, just because someone was too weak to stay still.

I grabbed him by the collar and pulled, but he was heavy, and my foot slipped for a moment. That's when I realized: This is how it is. This is how it always is. You want to save someone, and suddenly they pull you along.

Tom was there again, like a damned shadow. He grabbed my belt, yanked me back while I held the boy by the collar. We slammed into a crate, wood creaked, and the boy hung half over the railing for a moment, legs in the air, eyes wide, full of water even before he had water in his mouth.

"Hold on tight, you stupid bastard!" yelled Tom.

The boy finally grabbed hold of the rope, and we pulled him in, jerkily, not gently. He fell onto the deck, gasping, choking, and began to tremble.

Briggs approached slowly, without haste. He was never in a hurry. "Stand up," he said.

The boy remained seated, looked up, tears in his eyes, ashamed, frightened. "I..."

Briggs took a step closer. "Stand up."

The boy wobbled, stood up, his knees weak.

Briggs said quietly, "You don't die because you're evil. You die because you're soft."

The boy swallowed, nodded, and I saw: He understood. At least for today.

Briggs glanced briefly at me and Tom. No thank you. No acknowledgment. Just that look: Another close call. And luck isn't a quality at sea. Luck is chance, and that eventually runs out.

"Go on," Briggs said. And the men went back to work as if nothing had happened, but you could feel the atmosphere change. A man nearly falling overboard reminds everyone how close the end is. It makes them either more cautious or more ferocious.

Things took a turn for the worse when, in the afternoon, a scream suddenly erupted from the hatch, unlike any before. Not a feverish scream. Not a scream of pain. A scream that said: Something is happening down there that shouldn't be.

Briggs was there immediately. So was I. Tom, too. The woman stood up, bloody up to her forearms, her eyes narrowed.

"What?" asked Briggs.

"He's gone," she said.

"Who?" asked Tom, even though he already knew.

"The Clean One," she said.

Keene.

The word hung in the air like a knife. Briggs' face remained calm, but I saw something inside him harden. Not fear. Anger. Anger is dangerous with Briggs because it makes him even less human.

"How?" asked Briggs.

The woman wiped her forearm with a cloth, as if it were just dirt. "The guards were drinking," she said. "One was sleeping. One was laughing. And he was doing calculations."

Briggs looked towards the hatch, then at the men working, drinking, pretending everything was back to normal. "Keep the guns clear," he said. Then to Tom: "You take four men and search."

Tom nodded, no comment. This wasn't a hunt, this was maintenance. A leak is being plugged before the water comes.

I wanted to go with him, but Briggs stopped me with a look. "You're staying," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

Briggs stepped closer. "Because Keene is looking for you," he said quietly. "Not the others. You."

That was the kind of sentence that leaves a chill in the stomach. Keene hadn't simply disappeared. Keene was on his way. And on his way means: somewhere among our men, somewhere among our shadows.

The woman stood next to me, and I felt her voice fall silent. "He's going to use someone," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"And if he can't find one," she said, "he'll take what he can get."

I looked at her. "You mean yourself."

She shrugged. "He also dates men. Just differently."

She was right about that. Keene wasn't desire. Keene was power. Power takes everything.

The wind picked up again, as if it had heard the word "Keene" and decided to test us a little more. The sail tightened, the ship heeled slightly, and for a moment everything was work again, wood again, rope again.

But now there was a tension at work. Every glance went to the hatch more often. Every step sounded more suspicious. And you could feel it: the sea forgives no weakness – but a ship also forgives no cracks. Keene was a crack. Not a big one. A small, clean one. Those are precisely the most dangerous.

Tom returned that evening. No Keene. Just a look that said: He's closer than we want to be.

"He's somewhere," Tom murmured.

"Yes," I said.

Briggs nodded once. "Then he will show up."

"When?" someone asked.

Briggs looked at the man. "When you're tired," he said. "When you drink. When you think you've forgotten him."

The man swallowed.

I stood at the railing, looked out at the water, and I thought of the boy, how he almost fell. One step. One moment. One grasp too late. The sea needs so little.

And Keene needs so little.

The sea forgives no weakness. Not in your hands. Not in your mind. Not in your vigilance. And now we had a man on board just waiting for one of us to be weak enough to show it.

I inhaled the salt and felt the rum from yesterday still clinging somewhere deep inside me. Not as warmth. As a warning.

The night Keene is free, you don't sleep. You only pretend to. You lie there, eyes half-closed, ears open, and every creak in the wood sounds like a footstep. Every gust of wind sounds like a whisper. And at some point, you no longer know if you actually heard anything or if your mind is just replaying its own nightmares because it knows no rest.

Briggs put on double watch. No rum. No dice. No stories. Work until your hands burn, then keep your eyes open until your eyelids ache. Some grumbled, but quietly. Nobody wanted to be the one complaining when, in the end, there's a knife in your gut and you're thinking: I should have kept my mouth shut.

Tom paced the deck like a dog that smells blood. He went into corners, into shadows, between crates. He knocked on wood, as if he could lure Keene from the ship's hold. He hardly spoke. When Tom doesn't speak, he's at his most dangerous.

The woman stayed with the wounded, but she was awake. She was always awake. I saw her glance toward the bow once, as if she had just heard something, and then calmly resume her work, as if refusing to let fear show on her face. That was probably the only reason she was still alive.

I wasn't sitting. I was standing. Back to the railing, looking out over the deck. I wanted to see the shadows before they moved. And I wanted to see if the men were starting to weaken. Keene doesn't need darkness. He only needs tiredness.

The wounded man downstairs stopped screaming. That was worse. Screams make you soft, yes, but silence makes you superstitious. When a man stops screaming, everyone wonders: Is he dead? And if he is dead, who's next? Questions are like rats. They multiply quickly.

Late that night, when the wind died down and the sea became so calm it was almost unnatural, I heard a sound that didn't belong to the ship. A soft scraping. Not wood on wood. More like metal on wood. A knife grazing somewhere because someone was drawing a blade and was too lazy to be quiet.

I didn't move immediately. I pretended I hadn't heard it. Keene is a man who likes to see who reacts. For him, reacting is like a light in the darkness.

The scratching returned, closer. Then silence. And in that silence, I felt the air change. As if an animal had entered the room.

"You're awake," a voice behind me said. Quietly. Keene.

I turned slowly, as if none of this mattered. Keene stood there, a short distance away, half in shadow, the blade in his hand. Not the same one as before. A different one. Probably stolen from some crate while the guards slept. His face was calm, almost friendly. Keene could be friendly, like a rope is friendly: He lies there, harmless, until he tightens.

"I never sleep well," I said.

Keene smiled. "Good. Sleep is for people who think they deserve tomorrow."

I glanced left, then right. Tom was nowhere in sight. The nearest men were a few steps away, but too far to intervene immediately if Keene was quick. Keene had planned this, of course. Keene plans everything.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He raised the blade slightly, as if showing it off like a gift. "I want to talk."

"With a knife?" I asked.

"Knives are honest," Keene said. "You said so yourself. Guns are honest, knives are... more personal."

"Talking isn't your thing," I said.

Keene grinned. "Yes. I talk until the others get tired. Then I act."

"You're already taking action," I said.

He shrugged. "I'm only considering one possibility."

I felt my body tense. Not in a panic. Ready. Keene was fast. But I was heavier. Heavier is sometimes good.

"You've lost here," I said.

Keene chuckled softly. "Lost? I've only learned. You think a fight decides everything. But fights are just chapters. The story..." He let the sentence hang, as if he were a preacher. "...that's written later."

"You want Briggs," I said.

Keene nodded slowly. "Briggs is a problem."

"He is the only order here," I said.

Keene snorted. "Order? It's a cage. And you're standing in it voluntarily."

I said nothing. Keene could talk, yes. And sometimes he hit his mark. That was his poison.

"I don't want you to agree with me," he continued. "I just want you to understand that you are more important than you think."

"I am a man with a beard," I said.

Keene took a step closer. "You are the face. Briggs is the hand. Tom is the knife. But you... you are what the others see and fear. You are the rumor. You are the reason women on the wharf drag their children in."

I heard a soft footstep behind me. Someone's moving. Good. Keene hears it too. Bad.

"And?" I asked.

Keene lowered his voice. "And I want you."

There it was. Not in the sense of desire. In the sense of possession. Keene wanted me like a flag. Like a cannon. Like a tool.

"You want me to betray Briggs," I said.

Keene grinned, as if I'd finally understood something. "I want you to replace Briggs."

I laughed briefly. "You're really sick."

"No," said Keene. "I'm logical. Briggs will use you eventually and then discard you. Just like he uses everything."

"And you don't?" I asked.

Keene met my gaze. "I use it openly. Briggs uses it like it's a duty. That's worse."

A shadow moved closer. Tom, perhaps. Or a guard. Keene noticed it, and his hand holding the blade lifted slightly, as if he were about to cut.

"You only have two options," Keene said. "You go with me, or you go against me."

"And what if I just flatten you right now?" I asked.

Keene smiled, very calmly. "Then someone else will die."

He tilted his chin to the right.

I followed the gaze, and there I saw her: the woman, a few steps away, emerging from a shadow, her hands empty, but her eyes alert. So Keene had her in his sights too. Of course. Keene takes what you love or what you protect, whether you want to admit it or not.

"You bastard," I said quietly.

Keene nodded. "Yes."

The woman said nothing. But I saw her fingers move slightly, as if she were ready to pull something, throw something, do something. But she was too far away. And Keene was close enough that one wrong move could cost her her life.

"You want her as collateral," I said.

Keene glanced at her briefly, then back at me. "Deposit is such an ugly word. I call it... motivation."

I spat. "What do you really want?"

Keene took another step closer. The blade was now close enough for me to see it out of the corner of my eye, glinting in the dim light. "Briggs has to go," he said. "And you have to stop acting like you're just his dog."

Tom was there now. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, silent, tense, but he remained standing. He understood immediately: if he jumped, the woman would be dead. Tom wasn't weak, but he wasn't stupid either. He waited.

Briggs wasn't there. Of course not. Briggs would be here if he knew Keene was here. But Keene had chosen it this way. Keene plays with gaps.

I breathed in slowly. Salt. Wood. Fear. Not mine. Hers.

"You want to buy me," I said to Keene.

Keene smiled. "I want to set you free."

"Liberation is the word that liars use," I said.

Keene raised his eyebrows. "And what is your word?"

I briefly thought of the boy who almost fell overboard. Of the wounded man with the fever. Of the dead in the water. Of rum. Of cannons. Of God, who never came. It all came together in a single sentence, not beautiful, but true.

"Survival," I said.

Keene laughed softly. "Survival is small."

"Survival is everything," I said.

And then I did something Keene hadn't expected: I said loudly, clearly, into the night: "Briggs!"

Keene twitched slightly. Just a hint. But I saw it.

"You're yelling," he said, and there was suddenly anger in his voice. Keene hates it when you challenge his control.

"Yes," I said. "I'm screaming because you think you've silenced me."

Keene raised his blade.

And the woman moved at the same time. Not towards him. To the side. A step that belonged only to her. And I understood: She wasn't waiting to be rescued. She was creating space for herself.

Tom jumped now, too. Quickly, silently. Keene jerked his head towards him, and in that tiny distraction, I stepped forward. Not with a knife. With my full weight.

My shoulder thrust connected with Keene's chest. He staggered back. The blade jerked, slicing my forearm, a hot, sharp pain. Blood. Honestly. Keene stumbled, tried to yank the blade back up, but Tom was on him, grabbing his wrist, twisting it like he always does. Keene cursed, not a single elegant word, just filth.

The woman no longer stood as a pledge; she stood as a possibility. She drew her small blade and stepped closer, her eyes cold.

Keene saw it, and I saw him calculate in a second: two against one. No, three against one if Briggs came. His chance was gone.

He tore himself free, shoved Tom away, and jumped backward into the shadows like an animal finding a last-ditch escape route. "This isn't over!" he hissed.

"Nothing is over," I said, bleeding.

He disappeared, and the night swallowed him.

Tom stood next to me, breathing heavily. "You're hurt," he said.

"Just a scratch," I said.

The woman came closer, looked at my blood, and I realized: she wasn't shocked. She was just annoyed because blood means work.

"Keene is truly free now," she said.

"He was like that before, too," I said.

And then I heard footsteps, heavy footsteps, orderly. Briggs arrived, too late, as always when Keene plays. He saw my blood, saw our faces, saw the direction in which Keene had disappeared.

"He was looking for you," Briggs said softly.

"Yes," I said.

Briggs' gaze turned cold. "Then he's looking for me now."

The wind tugged at the flag. The sea was calm, like a spectator who already knows how it will end.

The sea does not forgive weakness.

And tonight we just showed that weakness isn't just tiredness. Weakness is also believing you can lock up a man like Keene and then forget about him.

I started to like my name.

The next morning my arm ached, but not badly. The kind of pain that reminds you that you weren't just dreaming yesterday. Blood is a good alarm clock. Better than the sun. Better than Briggs' roar. Blood is the little receipt that shows you: You've paid again.

The men stared at me as if the scratch were a medal. That was new. Before, they saw my beard, my eyes, my posture. Now they saw the mark, too. They saw that Keene really wanted me. And if a jerk like Keene wants you, then for many people that means: You're important. People are simple. They believe in importance like children believe in monsters under the bed. If you scare them, you must be real.

Briggs didn't make a scene. He never made a scene. He just came over to me, looked at the bandage the woman had put on me, and said, "You were screaming."

"Yes," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained on my face. "Why?"

"Because I didn't want to die quietly," I said.

He nodded slightly. "Dying quietly is convenient. For others."

"Keene wanted me," I said.

"I know," said Briggs.

Of course he knew. Briggs always knows when it's too late. But at least he knows it then.

Tom was out again, with two men, searching for clues, searching for shadows, searching for a man who leaves no trace unless he wants to. Keene was like a rat. You hear it, you smell it, but you only see it when it jumps in your face.

The woman continued working as if she had no time for that kind of drama. She had bandaged my arm, tightly, neatly, without asking if I wanted her to. She had simply done it. That was perhaps the first thing I truly liked about her: she doesn't ask. She acts.

The wounded man with the fever was still alive. That was a miracle or a curse, depending on how you want to see it. He had become quieter. His eyes were often closed. His breathing was shallow, like a wave that never rises. And every time I went downstairs and saw him, I thought: He's not dying because he's weak. He's dying because we can't let him go. Sometimes holding on is the greatest weakness.

Briggs kept the ship running, kept the men working, had the cannons cleaned, as if we were about to have to negotiate again. That was the new state of affairs: constant readiness. Constant readiness means: you get tired eventually. And tired means: Keene.

I noticed the team looked at me differently. Not all of them. Not the same way. But enough to feel it. Glances lingered a fraction longer. Comments faded as I walked by. One of them didn't

call me "Beard" or "Dude" or any stupid nickname. One of them said my name. Just like that, as if it were normal.

My name.

I never used to like it. Names are like shirts that other people put on you. You either grow into them or you tear them off. Mine sounded like country. Like a man who wants to own a house somewhere someday, and that had always seemed like a curse to me. A house is a cage with pretty walls. I didn't want a cage. I wanted wind.

But now, after cannons, after blood, after Keene's blade, my name sounded different. It no longer sounded like land. It sounded like weight. Like reputation. Like something that lingers in other men's mouths.

I walked across the deck, and a few made way without me having to stare. Not out of respect for me as a person. Out of respect for the rumor growing around me. And rumors grow quickly at sea because there's nothing but wind and stories.

Tom eventually came back, sweaty and angry. "No sign of it," he said.

"Of course," I said.

"He's somewhere around here," Tom growled. "He didn't jump into the sea."

"Keene doesn't jump," I said. "Keene crawls."

Tom looked at me. "You had him briefly yesterday."

"Yes," I said. "And then he's gone."

Tom spat. "That annoys me."

"That's it," I said.

He nodded. "Briggs will catch him eventually."

"Maybe," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "You don't believe in Briggs?"

"I believe in timing," I said. "And Keene has good timing."

Tom laughed briefly. "Then you need to improve."

I said nothing. I knew he was right. At sea, you either get better or you die. That's the whole story.

Later that day, I walked past the team and heard two men talking quietly to each other. Not whispering about Keene. About me.

"He's the one who didn't buy Keene," one said.

The other replied: "He shouted. That was brave."

"Brave or stupid," said the first one.

"Courage is only stupid with luck," said the second one.

I grinned. Exactly. Courage is foolish when combined with luck. And luck is like a coin that falls out of your pocket eventually.

The woman approached me as I was standing at the bow, watching the sea. She stood beside me, looking not at me, but at the water. "They're going to say your name now," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"You like that," she said.

I wanted to disagree, but it would have been a lie. So I said, "Maybe."

She nodded as if that were enough. "Names are like weapons," she said. "When others use them, they become sharp."

"And what if they use it incorrectly?" I asked.

She looked at me. "Then he'll cut you off."

There it was again, her way: no comfort, only truth.

I looked out at the sea again. It was calm, but not friendly. It was that smiling sea that promises you no one will die today, and then in the evening it steals one of you.

"I never liked my name," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it sounds like it's from the past," I said.

"The past is dead," she said. "You are here."

I laughed softly. "You're really bad at comforting people."

"Comforting is lying," she said. "I don't lie."

I wanted to say something, something silly, something to take the edge off. But then I heard that faint scratching again. Not as close as yesterday. More like somewhere at the edge, somewhere it shouldn't be.

I turned my head.

Nothing.

The wind tugged at my beard, and I suddenly felt: the ship was full of eyes. Not just ours. His too. Keene was watching. Keene was waiting. Keene wanted my name to grow bigger, because big names are hard to come by.

And as I stood there, with a bandage on my arm and salt on my face, I realized: I was beginning to like my name because it belonged to me. Not the port. Not the captain. Not Keene.

Me.

And if Keene wants to take him from me, he has to come closer.

Much closer.

When you start liking your name, you start taking yourself seriously. And taking yourself seriously is dangerous. It's like a freshly sharpened blade: good for cutting, bad for playing. You become rigid. You look longer in mirrors, even if it's just the bare edge of a knife. You listen more closely when someone calls you because you think there's meaning in it now. And meaning at sea is like a hole in the hull: small at first, fatal at last.

The men called me more often. Not because they loved me, but because they wanted to use me. "Can you..." "Look at this..." "Tell Briggs..." I suddenly became the bridge between what they dared to do and what they didn't. And at first, that feels good because you think: They see me. But eventually, you realize: They're just putting their weight on you so they can walk more easily themselves.

Briggs noticed it too. Of course. He observed everything, even the things he wouldn't admit to. He came up to me while I was checking a rope and said, "You're walking between them too much."

"Someone has to do it," I said.

Briggs' gaze was flat. "No. You don't have to. You want to."

I pulled on the rope as if that were the discussion. "Maybe," I said.

"Perhaps is a word for people who don't want to make up their minds," said Briggs.

I looked at him. "You always decide."

"Yes," said Briggs. "That's why I live."

He let it go and walked on as if he had just given me advice that I would later pay dearly for if I ignored it.

Tom didn't find Keene. Keene found us. Not with a knife to his throat this time. With small things. With drops.

A knot that was suddenly different in the morning than in the evening. A barrel that wasn't where it was supposed to be. A crate that was open even though no one wanted to touch it.

Nothing major. Nothing that would immediately make you want to hang a man. That's precisely the art. Keene turned the ship into a question. And questions make men nervous.

One of the guards swore he'd heard footsteps in the night. Another said it was just the wind. The wind is always used as an excuse because the wind doesn't defend itself. Keene doesn't defend himself either. He just smiles.

The woman approached me as I was standing by the weapons depot. "Someone has been here," she said.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

She pointed at a box. A small splinter on the edge, fresh. "You don't do that if you know the box," she said. "That's a stranger. Or a fool."

"Keene isn't stupid," I said.

"Then he is a stranger," she said.

I grinned. "On the ship?"

She looked at me. "In their minds," she said.

That was the point. Keene wasn't just a man. Keene was a thought. A thought that says: Briggs is a cage. The captain is a puppet. You could be great, too. You could rule, too. You could take, too.

And such thoughts don't even need a knife. They only need tiredness, rum, and a little wounded pride.

In the afternoon, there was a fight over something trivial. A ration. A piece of dried meat that someone had supposedly gotten too much of. Normally, that would have been a quick curse and that would have been the end of it. But now there was this thin layer of nervousness that ignited everything. Two men were shouting at each other, one pushing, the other hitting, and suddenly we had that feeling again from back then: blood is ready to be drawn, even if it's just about food.

Briggs came, saw it, and ended it with a look and a blow. Not violently. Just a quick slap with the flat of his hand against the pusher's throat. The man fell to the ground, choking. Briggs said, "Anyone who fights over food doesn't have enough work."

Then he pointed at them both. "Double shift."

They grumbled, but they obeyed. Briggs doesn't win with love. He wins by handing out consequences like bread.

I stood nearby, and I noticed: some men weren't just looking at Briggs. They were looking at me too. As if they were checking to see if I would say something, if I would intervene, if I would take sides. That was new. That was the name. The name is like a magnet. It attracts attention, and attention eventually becomes expectations.

"You want this," Tom whispered later, when we were alone.

"What?" I asked.

"That they look," said Tom. "That they wait."

I wanted to disagree again, but I'd had enough lies for a lifetime. "Maybe," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "You're starting to like yourself."

"I'm beginning to understand myself," I said.

"Understanding is the first step to becoming an asshole," said Tom.

"We're such assholes," I said.

"Yes," said Tom. "But some people become assholes with crowns."

I laughed softly. "You mean Briggs."

Tom shook his head. "Briggs doesn't have a crown. Briggs only has a hammer. I mean you."

That hit home. Not hard. More like a stone you suddenly feel in your shoe. It'd been there all along, but now you notice it.

"Keene wants that," I said.

Tom nodded. "Keene wants you to feel sexy in the mirror."

I spat. "I don't think I'm hot."

Tom shrugged. "Not yet."

Later that evening, when the sun had set and the sea had darkened again, Briggs came to me. He stood close, but not threateningly. Briggs doesn't need to be threatening. He is threatening simply by existing.

"You're getting too big," he said.

I looked at him. "Too big for what?"

"For the ship," Briggs said. "Big men capsize ships."

"I'm not tipping anything," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained calm. "You're already tipping over. You just don't realize it."

I felt anger inside me, hot, brief. "Keene is the problem," I said.

Briggs nodded. "Keene is a problem. But Keene is also just a mirror. It shows you what you could be. And you're not as smart as you think if you believe you're immune."

That was the next thing I hated about Briggs: he could tell the truth without enjoying it. He told it like a weather report.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Briggs glanced briefly across the deck, as if checking if anyone was listening. Then he said quietly, "I want you to remember your name."

"I've only just started to like him," I said.

Briggs nodded. "Exactly. Names are dangerous. They make you soft in places you can't control."

"And you?" I asked. "Would you like your name?"

Briggs' mouth twitched slightly. "I don't need a name. I need a ship."

Then he left.

I stood there and felt something stir inside me. Not pride. More like that dark thing that says: Maybe I could. Maybe I really could.

And right there, at that moment, I heard that faint scratching again. Not metal. More like paper. As if someone were moving a piece of fabric or a card somewhere. Quietly. Carefully.

I turned around quickly.

Nothing.

But I knew: Keene wasn't gone. Keene was everywhere men are tired. Everywhere a name suddenly gains weight. Everywhere someone starts to like themselves.

I looked out at the sea, and I thought: I like my name. Yes. But if I like it too much, it will devour me.

And the sea does not forgive weakness.

Perhaps a name cannot forgive them either.

At night, you hear your own blood louder. Not literally, but you feel it. You feel it moving, its warmth, its power to keep you alive even though the cold sea outside awaits. And you feel a name suddenly take root in your mind like a song you can't shake. My name. No longer that land thing, no longer a shirt that doesn't fit. Now it was a sound other people uttered with caution. A sound that closes doors.

That's flattering. And flattery is like rum: first it warms you, then it makes you stupid.

I walked across the deck, slowly, as if I had time. But I didn't. Nobody has time at sea. But I wanted to feel what it was like when people made way. I wanted to hear conversations break off as I approached. I wanted that little tug in the air that says: Here comes someone who might decide. Maybe. That word again. Maybe is the beginning of the end.

Tom saw me from the shadows. He said nothing. But his gaze was like a nail. He knew what I was doing: trying on my name like a new jacket. And Tom hates new jackets. New jackets make people vain.

The woman was among the supplies, counting cloths, needlework, something. She remained sober, as always. Sober is an insult to many men. Sober says: I see you. And men don't want to be seen. They want to be admired or feared. Being seen is too close.

I paused briefly, gazing out into the darkness. The sea was calm, but not peaceful. Calm simply meant that it was silently feeding today. And somewhere out there, in the invisible space between the waves, lay the dead we had dumped last night. I imagined them sinking, slowly, eyes open, mouths perhaps still holding a final curse. And then I thought: If I like my name, then maybe I'll also like the idea that I won't end like that. That I'll leave a trace. A sentence. A rumor that won't sink.

That's exactly what Keene is building on.

I suddenly felt it, this sensation that someone was watching me. Not like at the guard post, not like with Tom. Different. Colder. Like a hand already hanging from your neck, but not yet grasping.

"Nice evening," said a voice behind me.

Keene.

I didn't turn around immediately. I exhaled first. If you turn around too quickly, you show fear. And fear is Keene's favorite perfume.

"You'll get boring eventually," I said.

Keene stepped out of the shadows. No knife was visible this time. That was the dangerous part. Keene without a knife meant: Keene had another one in his pocket. Or he didn't need one because he believed words were enough.

"You like your name," he said, as if it were a statement about the weather.

"I like it when you shut up," I said.

He laughed softly. "See? Exactly that. You get bigger. You get tougher. And you think that's just you. But that's the name."

I took a step closer, not aggressively, just enough so he would realize: I'm not afraid to look you in the eye. "What do you want?" I asked.

Keene raised his hands slightly. "This time it's nothing you could consider blackmail. I just want to talk because you're finally listening."

"I'm listening because I'm awake," I said. "Not because you're interesting."

Keene nodded as if I'd complimented him. "Awake, yes. Awake is good. Briggs is awake too. Tom is awake. But you're... you're awake in a dangerous way. You're starting to believe."

"I don't think so," I said.

Keene grinned. "You believe in yourself. That's enough."

I spat. "That's exactly your trick. You want me to turn against Briggs."

Keene shrugged. "I don't want you to belittle yourself. Briggs belittles you because he belittles everything that gets in his way."

"Briggs holds the ship together," I said.

"Briggs holds the ship together, yes," said Keene. "Like a rope holds a bundle together. Tightly. Too tightly. And eventually something breaks. Do you know what breaks then? Not the rope. The bundle."

I stared at him. "And you want to be the one who rebinds the bundle."

"No," Keene said. "I want you to tie it. I want to stand behind you. I want them to say your name and do my work without knowing it's my work."

That was the truth. No heroism. No freedom. Keene wanted shadow power. He wanted a face in the foreground and his hand in the background. He wanted me as his flag.

"You want me to be stupid," I said.

Keene laughed softly. "No. I want you to be honest. Honest about what you want."

The word "honest" in his mouth was like a knife through butter. It went in too easily.

"And what do you want?" I asked.

Keene glanced across the deck as if counting the men like coins. "I don't want us to die because Briggs is too proud to change," he said. "I don't want us to hang because a captain prays instead of running. I want us to eat the crown before it eats us."

"That sounds almost noble," I said.

"Noble is just hunger with perfume," said Keene.

I had to grin for a moment, even though I hated that he sometimes hit the nail on the head.

"You talk like a man who never bleeds," I said.

Keene looked at the bandage on my arm. "You like to bleed," he said. "You make a story out of it."

"Fuck you," I said.

He stepped closer, and his voice grew quieter. "Your name is growing. You can use that. You can control them. You can tell them when to drink, when to fight, when to be silent. You can create order without acting like you are a cage."

"And Briggs?" I asked.

Keene looked at me, very calmly. "Briggs falls overboard. An accident. The sea doesn't forgive weakness, right? Then we call it weakness. One wrong step. A rope slips. A man stumbles. Anything happens."

I felt myself getting cold. Not because I love Briggs. Because I understood: Keene turns murder into weather. Keene turns murder into "happens." And that is the most disgusting thing of all.

"You are sick," I said again.

Keene nodded. "Yes. But I'm useful. And you know that."

I heard footsteps. Tom. Soft, quick. Keene heard them too, and he stayed exactly where he was. No flight response. He knew Tom wouldn't attack immediately as long as Keene wasn't visibly threatening. Keene always played by rules that no one wrote down, but everyone followed.

Tom stepped out of the shadows, his eyes hard. "You talk too much," Tom said.

Keene grinned. "And you don't listen enough."

Tom looked at me. "What does he want?"

I said, "He wants Briggs to die by accident."

Tom remained calm, but I saw his hand twitch briefly. Tom doesn't like coincidences. Tom likes simple solutions. And Keene wasn't a simple solution.

Keene raised his hands again. "I only offered an idea," he said. "Ideas are harmless."

"Ideas are cannons," I said.

Keene laughed. "Well said."

I took a step closer and lowered my voice. "You won't get Briggs," I said.

Keene looked at me, and his gaze was suddenly very clear. "Then I'll get you," he said softly. "Not today. Not tomorrow. But sometime. Because you like your name. And whoever likes their name wants it to stay."

Tom cursed softly.

I felt something inside me tense up. A part of me wanted to take Keene down right then and there. Just like that. End of story. But Keene wasn't just flesh. Keene was a problem that would split open if you hit him wrong.

"Get lost," I said.

Keene nodded, as if it had been a polite conversation. "I always disappear," he said. "Until I come back."

Then he stepped back into the shadows, and he was gone, as if the ship itself had swallowed him up.

Tom looked at me. "You've really grown," he said.

"Shut your mouth," I said.

"No," said Tom. "Listen. Keene is right about one thing."

I stared at him.

Tom pointed to the deck, to the men watching us out of the corner of their eyes, as if we were the real battle. "They're watching you," Tom said. "And if you value your reputation, at some point you'll start to believe you have to give them something. Decisions. Leadership. Hope. That's the road to your grave."

I exhaled. "And what am I supposed to do?"

Tom shrugged. "Stay dirty. Stay hungry. Stay... you. Not the name."

The woman joined us without me noticing. She stood beside us, and her voice was calm. "The name is already there," she said. "You can't throw it back into the water."

I looked at her. "And then what?"

She looked at me, and there was no comfort in her eyes. Only a kind of cold advice. "Then make sure your name doesn't become Keene's Blade," she said. "But yours."

I stood there, wind in my beard, blood under the bandage, salt on my tongue, and I realized: Yes. I liked my name. But now it was also a burden. A weapon. Something others wanted to get their hands on.

And the sea does not forgive weakness.

Perhaps a name cannot forgive them either.

Black smoke, black humor

The next day, the smoke still lingered in my mind, even though the cannons had long since been cleaned. Black smoke is like a bad thought: you can wipe it away, you can blow it away, but it still sits somewhere in your creases, in your hair, under your tongue. And when you laugh, the laughter tastes like gunpowder.

We had the pinch on a leash like a toothless dog, and yet it still barked. Wood creaked, ropes groaned, the water lashed against them as if trying to get on our nerves. The men worked

because Briggs let them work. Work is his kind of prayer. You tie, you pull, you patch holes, you mend, as if you could set the world right. And yet you know: one hit, one knife, one moment when you think you're safe—and it's all open again.

The sun peeked out briefly, a pale joke in the sky, as if it were afraid of us. Some men use the sun to rejoice. We used the sun to see blood better. Blood dries faster in the sun. And blood on deck is like a bad story: if you don't scrub it away, it will continue to spread.

The boy who had almost fallen overboard scrubbed like a man possessed. I saw him kneeling, his hands red from rubbing, his gaze fixed, as if he believed he could pull the weakness out of the wood. That's not how it works. Weakness isn't in the deck. Weakness is in the gut. It's there the moment you let go.

Tom came by, stopped briefly, watched the boy and said: "You're scrubbing like you're trying to get your mother out of the wood."

The boy flinched, looked up, wanted to say something, but swallowed it down. Because that's how Tom talks: like a knife you don't see coming. A few people laughed. Not kindly. Laughter is rarely friendly around here. Laughter is usually a reaction to fear. You laugh so you don't scream.

"Stop scrubbing," said Tom. "The wood is going to die anyway. So are you."

That was his sense of humor. Dark humor. Humor that doesn't offer comfort, but simply shows: We know how it ends. And that's precisely why we carry on.

I walked past the gun deck, saw the barrels, black, clean, ready. The things looked like they were bored. Cannons never get bored. They wait. Like Keene.

Keene was somewhere in the belly of that ship, in the crevices, in the minds, in the little flaws. You couldn't see him, but you could taste him. Like metal when you bite your lip. And that made the men nervous. Nervous men tell jokes, because jokes are little lies you slip each other so no one notices how much they're shaking.

One of the old men, a fellow with teeth like rotten wood, told a story in the afternoon about a preacher who had been praying in a storm until lightning snatched his hat off his head. "There he stood," said the old man, "without a hat, without hair, and still praying. That's when I realized: God has poor hearing, but lightning has a sense of humor."

Laughter. Short. Dirty.

Another exclaimed: "Maybe God just hated the hat!"

More laughter. And I noticed how some of the tension was released in the laughter. Pressure is dangerous if it stays inside. Pressure can break planks. Pressure drives men crazy. Pressure makes Keene strong.

The woman continued working, walking across the deck, darning cloths, sewing tears, binding hands, as if she were the damned hand of God—only without the theatrics, without heaven, without promises. Some men made snide remarks, but quietly. No one wanted to be

the hero again, the one who gropes a woman and then suddenly discovers that heroes here quickly become dead.

I was standing by the bow, looking out, when Briggs came towards me. He smelled of tar, of tiredness, of control.

"They laugh too much," he said.

"Laughter is better than crying," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained flat. "Crying makes you weak. So does laughing."

"What do you want then?" I asked.

"Silence," said Briggs.

I grinned. "You want silence on a ship full of assholes. That's like a dry sea."

Briggs didn't flinch. "Silence is attention."

He was right about that. Attention is the one thing Keene can't buy if you keep it. Once you lose it, you're just material.

"Keene is somewhere," I said.

"Yes," said Briggs. "And he's waiting for the moment when you think your name protects you."

I felt a brief flush of heat. Not because I was offended. Because he placed his finger precisely on the itchy spot.

"My name protects no one," I said.

"Names are paper shields," Briggs said. "They only catch flames."

He kept walking. Briggs had a knack for throwing a sentence at you like a stone and then disappearing before you could throw it back.

Later, when the sun had disappeared again, the black smoke returned, that's right. Not from the fighting. From the cooking. Our galley was a hole where things that might once have been food were burned. One of the cooks had managed to set grease on fire, and suddenly smoke poured out of the hatch, thick, dark, stinking, as if the ship itself were coughing.

"Shit!" someone yelled.

Men ran, buckets flew, water was poured, and of course, water only made things worse, because grease and water hate each other like two men in the same bed. The smoke grew even thicker, crept across the deck, seeped into our eyes, and blinded us.

And right there, in the chaos, what always happens, happened: Someone slipped, slammed his backside onto the planks, and half the team laughed. Not because it was nice. Because it was

so absurd: Death everywhere, Keene somewhere, Krone maybe nearby, and we're laughing because someone sat on their butt.

The fallen man cursed like a talentless poet. "Fuck you all!"

Tom shouted through the smoke: "You're lying in a good position! Stay like that, maybe it will keep you alive!"

Laughter, coughing, wheezing. Dark humor, black smoke. All the same.

I saw the woman standing in the smoke, a cloth over her mouth, her eyes narrowed. She wasn't laughing. She was working. She pulled a bucket, emptied it, kicked someone's foot to keep them from running into the flames, as if they were an idiot trying to play the hero.

The fire eventually went out. Not because we were clever, but because it didn't have enough fuel. That's how it is with everything: fire, war, men. Eventually, the fuel runs out.

The smoke lingered, hanging over the deck like a disgruntled cloud. And in that smoke, in that thick, black grime, I suddenly heard a soft cough, one that didn't sound like our men. Not the rough, loud coughs of rum drinkers. More like a short, controlled sound. A person trying not to be heard.

I didn't move immediately. I breathed calmly, as best I could, even though the smoke was scratchy. My eyes burned, but I blinked slowly, forcing myself not to look too hasty. Keene would use a moment like this. Smoke is cover. Chaos is music to the ears of people like him.

I took a few steps, as if just checking to see if the fire was really out. Between crates, between ropes, between shadows that now clung even to the bright deck. And then I saw something: a crate that was slightly open, even though it had been closed before. A small crack. Nothing big. But big enough to glance at. Big enough for a hand.

I stopped, just one heartbeat too long.

The gap moved minimally, as if someone inside was breathing.

I said quietly, almost kindly: "If you're in there, Keene, then you'll smell like burnt fat now too. That's not a good perfume."

No answer. Only the smoke, creeping above us like a hand.

Tom appeared beside me, silently, as if he himself had learned how to disappear in a puff of smoke. "What?" he murmured.

I didn't point directly at the box. Pointing is a giveaway. I only said, "Smoke makes things visible."

Tom grinned crookedly, even though his eyes were serious. "Or invisible."

"It depends on who's watching," I said.

And somewhere behind us, someone was laughing again at some stupid joke, because people can't handle fear if they don't laugh at it. Dark humor is the last life jacket. It won't keep you afloat for long, but it makes you feel like you won't sink immediately.

I heard my name, somewhere in the smoke, half as a joke, half as a shout. And I realized: I still liked it. But I liked it differently now. Not as a caress. As a warning. My name was a sound that attracted Keene like lightning to a mast.

Black smoke, black humor.

And somewhere in there, a man who uses both to slit your throat while everyone is still laughing.

The smoke made everything smaller. The deck, the men, the world. You only see outlines, only hear sounds, and suddenly every movement is suspicious. That's exactly how Keene likes it. Keene isn't a storm. Keene is fog. He smooths over your edges so you run into something he's already put there.

Tom stood next to me, and I could feel his tension. Tom wasn't nervous, Tom was ready. Nervousness is a fidgety state. Ready is calm. And Tom was calm.

"You think he's in there," Tom murmured.

"I don't believe anything," I said. "I only smell."

Tom sniffed once, then spat. "I smell grease, smoke, and the shitty future."

"Exactly," I said.

The gap in the box was minimal. Maybe it was just the wood expanding and contracting. Wood always expands and contracts. But wood doesn't breathe. And I'd heard that cough. Short, controlled. Keene doesn't cough like a drunken sailor. Keene coughs like a man who's learned that noise is deadly.

I took a step to the side, as if just making room. Tom stayed. He stayed because he wanted to be the door in case someone wanted to get out. I almost grinned. Tom rarely has a sense of humor, but his body has principles. One of them: if someone tries to escape, they'll run through me.

"Hey!" someone suddenly shouted through the smoke. "Who saw the rum?"

Laughter. Of course. Rum. Always rum. Even when the ship is on fire, they're looking for rum. And Keene is looking for precisely these moments, when stupidity reigns supreme.

A man stumbled past, coughing and cursing. He was too close to the box. Too close. And I saw his shadow twitch briefly, as if something had brushed against him. The man didn't notice, because he was living in the smoke and the laughter. He kept walking, and I heard his cursing disappear into the mist.

Tom looked at me. His look said: There was something there.

I nodded almost imperceptibly. One mistake, one tiny one, and Keene gets an arm, a neck, a life.

I didn't draw my knife. Not because I didn't want one. Because a knife in the smoke will betray you if it flashes. And because that's exactly what Keene is waiting for: for you to arm yourself like an idiot and then strike blindly.

Instead, I took a piece of rope lying on the deck and wrapped it around my hand. Rope is soft, but it gets hard when you pull it. Rope isn't romantic. Rope is the kind of violence no one in port sings about. And yet, it hangs more men than any cannon.

Tom understood immediately. He picked up a hook, one of those things you use to pull crates. A dirty, heavy hook. A fist of metal.

"On three?" he whispered.

"No," I said. "On Keene's mistake."

Tom grinned crookedly. That was his version of patience.

The smoke thinned. Not much, but enough to make the outlines clearer. Men returned to their tasks. Some were still laughing about the guy who had fallen. One was telling the joke about how he supposedly would have personally stabbed Keene with a spoon if he'd found him. Everyone laughed because jokes like that are cheap. Keene was probably laughing somewhere when he heard it. Keene loves cheap jokes. They make you feel safe.

I stood beside the crate as if it were just wood. As if it were nothing. This is important: Keene mustn't realize you've noticed him. As soon as he realizes you've noticed him, he'll either flee or attack. And both are bad when you finally have him within reach.

One minute. Two. Maybe ten. Time is different in the smoke. Time is only breath.

Then I heard it again: that controlled cough. But this time it was closer to the crack. As if it were moving. As if it were making a decision.

Keene hates stagnation unless he's in control. He always wants to make the next move because otherwise he risks someone else making it.

The gap opened a tiny bit wider.

And I saw an eye. Not for long. A quick glance, like a rat checking if the cat is asleep.

The eye was bright, cold, awake.

I said quietly, "Too late."

Keene didn't immediately understand that I meant him. He probably thought I was talking to someone in the smoke. That was the mistake.

He pushed the crate open, just enough to get out. He didn't crawl. He glided. Keene moved like a thought. Quietly, quickly, without unnecessary muscle. In his hand he held a blade, flat, dark, not flashing. The bastard had learned.

He stood there, half out of the box, and there was a brief moment of surprise in his eyes. Not fear. Keene is rarely afraid. But surprise is quite something for him.

I threw the rope.

Not like a cowboy, not with any show. Simple. Direct. The rope wrapped around his forearm, slid up, and I pulled. Hard. Keene jerked his arm up, trying to free himself, but at that moment Tom stepped forward and hammered the hook into Keene's wrist.

A crackling sound. Not loud. But distinct.

Keene hissed. Not a word. Just that animal noise, because his body was currently contradicting him.

The blade didn't fall. Keene didn't let go. Keene never lets go when he thinks letting go is weakness. And the sea doesn't forgive weakness. Keene knew that. Keene was now himself in the grip of the rule.

I pulled the rope tighter. It cut into my hand, but I didn't care. Pain doesn't matter when you're finally holding something that would otherwise kill you.

Tom struck again, this time higher, against Keene's forearm. Keene gasped, clenched his teeth. His eyes shot toward me, and suddenly there was genuine hatred in them. Not calculated. Real. That was good. Hatred makes you stupid.

"You fucking beard," Keene hissed.

I grinned. "Say my name."

He spat, reached for the knife with his other hand, somewhere on his belt, but Tom kicked him in the stomach, just enough to knock the air out. Keene buckled slightly, and I pulled him completely out of the box, onto the planks.

There he lay.

Not like a demon. Like a man. Flesh. Bones. Breath.

And suddenly it became quieter around us. Not completely silent. But that special silence when the team realizes: something real is happening. No joke. No hype. No empty talk. A real opponent is lying in front of them.

A few men approached, cautiously, like dogs around a wounded animal. Some grinned. Some looked nervous. Keene had been a ghost to them. And now he was a body.

Briggs surfaced as if he'd sensed the fight. Briggs is like a damn shark. You don't see him, but when there's blood in the water, he's there.

He stepped closer, saw Keene on the ground, saw the rope, saw Tom's hook. He simply said, "Good."

That's it. Good. As if we'd just repaired a rope.

Keene suddenly laughed. Short, hoarse laughter. "Good," he said, and there was mockery in his voice. "You've got me."

Briggs didn't kneel. He remained standing. "Yes," he said.

Keene looked up at me, his eyes narrowed. "You think it's over," he said.

I pulled the rope even tighter. "No," I said. "I just think you're finally visible now."

Keene grinned, his lip bloody because Tom must have caught him somewhere. "Being visible is dangerous," he whispered. "Now you can kill me. And then what? Then you only have each other."

Briggs' face barely moved. "We've always known each other," he said.

Keene laughed again. "Then the ship is already dead."

I looked at the men. Some swallowed. Some looked away. Keene could still spray poison even on the ground. And poison works best when people are tired.

The woman stood at the edge, not close enough to be touched, close enough to see everything. Her eyes were cold. She said nothing. But she was there. And that mattered. Witnesses are sometimes more powerful than knives.

Tom spat. "What do we do with him?" he asked Briggs.

Briggs looked at Keene like a piece of rotten wood. "We'll tie him up," Briggs said. "And then we'll decide when to throw him away."

Keene grinned at me. "Throw them away," he said. "Like the dead."

I bent down a little. Not too close. Never too close. "The dead don't make any noise anymore," I said. "You do."

Keene raised his eyebrows. "You want me to be quiet?"

"I want," I said, "you to learn that you are not the wind."

Keene whispered, "I'm worse."

Tom grabbed him, turned him around, and roughly tied him up. Men helped, quickly, eagerly, as if they were finally catching a rat that had been bugging them for days. Keene allowed it because he knew: fighting now would only break his bones. Keene would fight later.

As they dragged him away, he coughed once, again in a controlled manner, and then laughed softly. And that laughter sounded like a threat in the black smoke.

Briggs looked at me. "You held him," he said.

"Tom hit him," I said.

Briggs nodded. "You held him."

That was his praise. And it didn't feel good. It felt heavy. Because holding on is responsibility. And responsibility is exactly what many men run away from with rum.

The smoke slowly dissipated. The sun peeked through again. The men started talking again. Immediately. Jokes. Curses. Stories. Dark humor as a band-aid.

One of them shouted: "Well, Keene! Do you want rum now too?"

Laughter.

Keene didn't laugh along. He just smiled, as if he remembered everything.

I stood there, the rope around my hand, my skin chafed, and I thought: Black smoke, black humor. We laugh because otherwise we would scream.

But Keene? Keene laughs because he knows that the next joke might be about us.

After they dragged Keene away, the deck reverted to what it always is: a workplace for men who pretend they aren't afraid. The sun pushed through the smoke like a dirty finger through a bandage. Everything was gray, everything smelled of burnt grease and the cold aftertaste of "just barely."

The team immediately started talking again. That's the way it is. As soon as the danger briefly subsides, people start talking it to death. They make jokes because jokes are little lies that tell you: You see, we're still here. We can still laugh. We're not just meat.

One of them shouted: "Tie him up tight, or he'll steal our trousers!"

Laughter.

Another said: "Oh, he only takes the clean ones!"

More laughter.

Dark humor isn't a talent. Dark humor is a reflex. Like coughing when smoke creeps into your lungs. You don't laugh because you find it funny. You laugh because you don't want your mind to start painting pictures.

I stood there, feeling the rope against my chafed hand, and I realized: my heart was beating more calmly, but not because I was relieved. Rather, because it was now beginning to calculate. Keene wasn't just a man with a knife. Keene was a thought that seeps into every crevice. Even bound, he still reeks of trouble.

Briggs allowed no celebration. No pats on the back, no "well done," no rum. He just yelled: "Everyone back in position! And anyone who leaves another crate open will get it in their teeth!"

Men ran, pretending to be busy, as if this were just a brief interruption. The ship breathed again in its rhythm: pulling, tying, hauling. Work as a blanket over the stench.

Tom came over to me, rubbing his fingers as if scrubbing the encounter with Keene off his skin. "He laughed," he said.

"Keene is always laughing," I said.

Tom snorted. "Not like that. He's laughing like he's won."

"Maybe he has," I said.

Tom stared at me. "What are you talking about? We've got him."

I nodded towards Luke, where they had brought Keene down. "We have his body," I said. "His mouth is still free."

Tom spat. "Then stuff something in his mouth."

"Briggs doesn't stuff anything," I said. "Briggs lets people talk so he can hear where the rot is."

Tom wanted to say something, but he kept quiet because he knew: Yes. Briggs likes to hear about faults. And faults are deadly on ships.

The woman stood a little apart, wiping soot from her hands as if it were all just dirt. She glanced over at me, and there was no "well done" in her eyes. Just a matter-of-fact: Now comes the next mess. She had that look other people have. Permanent state.

Later I went downstairs. Not because I enjoyed it. But because I wanted to see if Keene was already crawling into people's heads again, even though he was tied up.

Below deck it was warm, humid, heavy with breath. The air hung like a wet cloth. Keene sat strapped to a support, hands and feet pinned, back straight, as if he were sitting in a damned saloon. His lip was split, but he still looked impeccably groomed. Some people wear cleanliness like armor. With him, it was just a mask, but it fit well.

Two men stood before it, this time truly awake. No bottle, no laughter. Just eyes. They looked at Keene as if he were an animal you never let out of your sight, lest it suddenly be hanging in your throat.

Keene saw me coming and grinned. "There he is," he said. Not loudly. Not triumphantly. As if he were greeting an acquaintance.

"Shut your mouth," I said.

"Ah," said Keene, "that's the modern form of prayer, isn't it?"

I moved closer until I smelled his breath. Not too close, but close enough for him to realize: I'm not here to be nice. "You wanted to be visible," I said. "Now you are visible."

Keene blinked slowly. "Visible is good," he said. "Now they can hate me. Hate is energy. And energy moves things."

"You're not moving anything anymore," I said.

Keene laughed softly. "You think ropes are walls."

"Hold the ropes," I said.

"Ropes cut," said Keene. "Ropes break. Ropes get wet. Ropes get old. Everything gets old. Even Briggs."

I felt a brief impulse shoot through my arm: to punch him. Just like that. A moment of peace. But Keene wanted exactly that. He wanted me to lose myself. He wanted me to show that my name was just a thin veneer of stupidity.

"Briggs will decide," I said.

Keene nodded. "Yes," he said. "And while Briggs decides, others decide. That's the beauty of ships: you can't stop people from thinking."

"People don't think," I said. "People drink."

Keene grinned. "And that's exactly where thinking begins."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

Keene raised his eyebrows, as if surprised that I was asking the question. "You've already seen it," he said. "The looks. The jokes. That laughter upstairs. They're not laughing at me. They're laughing because they need to. And when they need something, you give it to them. Or I do."

I said nothing. He hit me too close.

Keene continued, quietly, as if he were selling me a secret: "Briggs is a cage. It gives them work so they don't feel. But eventually they want to feel. Eventually they want to decide. Eventually they want to believe they are more than hands."

"And then?" I asked.

Keene smiled, and the smile was as thin as paper. "Then it smells of sweat," he said.

I felt the back of my neck grow cold. Not because of Keene as a person. Because of Keene as an idea. He was speaking of that moment I already knew before I could name it: when men begin not just to obey, but to examine whether they still want to.

"You want mutiny," I said.

Keene laughed. "I just want some movement."

"You're a bastard," I said.

Keene nodded, satisfied. "Yes. But I'm your bastard."

The guards exchanged glances. One swallowed. Keene had done it again, without moving. He had reopened a wound that everyone could feel, but no one wanted to touch.

I stepped back. "You talk too much," I said. "And you talk too cleverly."

Keene grinned. "Smart is just another word for alert."

I went upstairs because otherwise I would have struck again. And I didn't want to give him that victory. Not today.

On deck, the smoke was almost gone, but the smell lingered. The smoke was like Keene: even if you don't see it, it's still there, somewhere in your hair, in your clothes, in your head.

The men were laughing again, but it sounded different than before. Not so freely. More like a test. One of them told the same joke twice, laughing louder the second time, as if he needed to convince himself that it still worked.

The boy who almost went overboard stood by the rope, tying a knot, his hands tight, his eyes too wide open. He looked like someone who wanted to prove every second that he wasn't weak. And that's exactly how mistakes begin.

Briggs walked across the deck, inspecting everything, saying little. He was calm, and calmness is his way of showing power. But I saw some men looking at him, no longer just as a hammer, but as a question. They said nothing. Not yet. But their eyes said: What are you doing to Keene? What are you doing to us? How long will you keep us in your cage?

Tom came back to me, quietly. "They're already talking," he said.

"About what?" I asked.

Tom looked towards the crew as if reading the words in the wind. "About Briggs always making the decisions," he said. "About you saving Keene. About your name..." He paused, as if the word caught in his throat. "...being useful."

I felt the beard in the wind, heavy as a piece of wet fabric. "Keene planned this," I said.

Tom nodded. "Keene plans everything."

The woman came over, stood beside us like a knife that doesn't need to shine to be sharp. "You can smell sweat before blood comes," she said softly.

I looked at her. "You mean..."

She nodded slightly. "The men are getting restless," she said. "And restless men look for reasons. Keene is a reason. Briggs is a reason. You are a reason."

I laughed once, dryly. "Am I a reason for what?"

"For hope," she said, as if it were a swear word.

Tom spat. "Hope is poison."

"Yes," she said. "But they still drink it."

I looked out over the deck. Over ropes, over planks, over faces that had been exposed to the wind for far too long. Men who had nothing left to lose, yet still lost every day. And I understood: Black humor isn't just a joke. It's a release valve. And when the valve gets clogged, the boiler explodes.

Keene was laughing down in the belly of the ship, but I couldn't hear him. I knew it anyway. Keene is laughing because he can sense the next move.

And I could smell him too.

Not as the smell of blood.

Like the smell of sweat.

Mutiny smells of sweat

Sweat is honest. Sweat doesn't lie, sweat doesn't pray, sweat doesn't give speeches. Sweat only tells you: Someone's working here. Or: Someone's scared. And with men, it's often the same thing, just packaged differently. Fear makes sweat cold. Work makes sweat hot. Mutiny makes sweat both, and then it stinks like a pub just before a fight.

Since Keene was tied to the stanchion below, things should have calmed down. That's how people on land think. They believe that if you tie down the problem, it ceases to be a problem. On a ship, it's different. On a ship, a tied-down man is still a voice. And voices are more dangerous than knives because knives only strike a body, while voices infect entire minds.

The men upstairs continued laughing, but now their laughter had edges. Like a smile you put on so no one notices how shitty you feel. The jokes grew louder, the pauses between them longer. In those pauses, you could hear it: that faint rubbing, the scraping of thoughts against each other.

I walked across the deck and noticed how thick the air was. Not because of smoke. Because of bodies. Because of proximity. Everyone was standing a fraction too close to each other, as if they had to make sure they weren't alone when things went wrong. Men love groups when they're scared. A group means: less of a target. And at the same time, a group means: more courage to do something stupid.

Briggs made his rounds as usual, calmly, with control, his gaze like a cold knife. He spoke little. He let others do the work. He let them be silent. Briggs believes in silence because silence forces you to hear your own thoughts. And when men hear their own thoughts, they

suddenly realize: there's more to life than just giving orders. There's pride. There's hunger. There's that old, miserable dream of "I could do it too."

Keene knew that. Keene had peed in the air like a dog marking its territory. You can't see it, but you can smell it.

Tom came to me as I stood by a rope, pretending to examine the fibers. In reality, I was examining faces. Tom whispered, "They're gathering."

"Who?" I asked, even though I already knew.

He nodded toward the port side, where three or four men had been standing together for a little too long, too close, too quietly. Not the loud ones. The loud ones are harmless. The loud ones shout, and then they fall asleep. The dangerous ones are the ones who become quiet because they no longer have to prove themselves. They believe they've already made up their minds.

"They're not saying anything," Tom murmured.

"That's the worst part," I said.

Tom spat. "When they start talking, it's pretty much over."

I looked at the men. One of them was the old man with the rotten teeth, always cracking jokes. Another was a broad-shouldered guy who liked to feel important when he was swimming in rum. And one was a silent bastard who rarely laughed but always listened intently. That was the mix that kills you: mouth, muscles, brain.

The woman walked by, carrying a bucket of water, as if water were the only thing left with any moral compass. She looked at the group, looked at me, and I noticed her gaze narrow. She smelled it too. Women are quicker to pick up on things like that. Maybe because they've been taught their whole lives that men can tip over like barrels.

"It stinks," she said quietly when she was with me.

"Yes," I said. "Looking for men."

She shook her head. "After a decision."

Tom growled: "No one."

"Keene is down," she said.

"Keene is everywhere," I said.

She nodded. "Sweat is its smoke."

I could have laughed, but I didn't feel like laughing. Laughter is nice when you can afford it. Today it was expensive.

Briggs stopped suddenly, in the middle of the deck, as if he'd felt an invisible jolt. He slowly turned his head, looking directly at the group. The men were pretending to talk about work. About ropes, about wind, about something. But their hands were too still. Hands betray you. You can lie with your mouth, but hands always speak the truth. And their hands were saying: We're waiting.

Briggs didn't go over immediately. Briggs rarely makes the first move in a game others want to play. He just stood there, letting his gaze do its work. A gaze like a weight on your neck. One of the men cleared his throat. Another scratched his chin. None of them really moved away.

Then Briggs carried on as if he didn't care. That was his mistake. Or his test. With Briggs, you never know.

I felt my name hanging in the background, like a knife on a table. I didn't need to hear it. I knew it was circulating in people's minds. The beard. The one who held Keene. The one who screamed. The one who wasn't bought. A few sentences are all it takes, and suddenly you're a symbol. And symbol is such an ugly word because it dehumanizes you. You become a flag. You become a tool. Exactly what Keene wanted.

In the afternoon came the heat. Not sun, but air. That damp, sticky heat that draws the sweat from your pores as if the ship itself were sweating. Men became more irritable. One cursed a knot as if it had insulted his mother. Another shoved someone simply because they were in his way. Little things. Little sparks. And sparks only need a barrel to ignite everything.

The old man with the rotten teeth came up to me as if by chance. He pretended to ask me something, something trivial. "Tell me," he began, "how much longer do you think Briggs will let us sail without a harbor?"

His voice was relaxed, but his eyes were not. His eyes were scrutinizing. He wanted to know if I would jump at the question like a dog on meat.

"As long as it's necessary," I said.

He grinned, as if it were a harmless answer. "Necessary," he repeated. "That's what Briggs always says."

"Because it's true," I said.

The old man leaned slightly closer. "And what if it's not true?" he asked quietly. "What if Briggs just likes making decisions?"

There it was. Not loud. Not open. But there.

I looked at him. "Then he likes to decide," I said. "That's better than a bunch of drunken idiots arguing in circles until they drown."

The old man laughed briefly. "You have a big mouth."

"Yes," I said. "Sometimes it keeps the water out of my lungs."

He studied me, and I saw: He didn't like the answer, but he respected it. Respect is also sweat, only dry.

"Keene said..." he began, and stopped immediately as if he had burned himself.

I took a step closer. Not threateningly, just precisely. "Keene's got something?" I asked.

The old man swallowed. "Oh... nothing. He's just talking."

"Exactly," I said. "He's talking. And you're listening."

The old man shrugged and grinned crookedly. "You listen when someone speaks intelligently."

"Clever words are often just pretty ropes," I said.

"And Briggs' words are ugly ropes," he retorted.

There was humor in it, but it was dark. And beneath the humor lay sweat.

I let him go. Not because I didn't care. Because you can't extinguish every spark with your fist. Sometimes you have to see where the fire comes from.

I went over to Tom. "They're throwing Keene's sentences around," I said.

Tom nodded. "They're stupid enough to think they're their own thoughts."

"And Briggs?" I asked.

Tom glanced over at Briggs, who was working on a block with two men as if it were the most important thing in the world. "Briggs knows," said Tom. "Briggs is just pretending he doesn't care."

"Briggs is waiting," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Briggs always waits. Until someone's already halfway in with the knife."

The woman stepped forward and wiped her hands on a cloth. "If it tips over, it tips over quickly," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She looked at me. "And you?" she asked.

"What about me?" I asked in return.

"Your name is in the middle of the room," she said. "When men stink, they look for a flag."

I felt a pull in my stomach. Not fear. More like anger. Anger that I could even slip into such a role, just because others are too cowardly to think for themselves.

"I am not a flag," I said.

"You don't decide that," she said. "They decide that."

Tom snorted. "And Keene."

I looked towards the hatch. Keene was down below. Bound. But his scent was up above. And that scent was sweat.

That evening, the atmosphere changed. Not dramatically. No drumbeat, no thunderstorm. Just a subtle shift. A few men didn't show up for Briggs's assignments as usual. They pretended they'd forgotten. Another lingered too long with the group on the port side. The broad-shouldered fellow laughed too loudly as Briggs walked by, as if testing how far he could go before the gavel fell.

Briggs did not respond immediately.

And that's exactly when I understood: This is the moment. Not when the knives are drawn. But when respect begins to quietly crumble because no one is feeding it anymore. Respect is like fire. If you don't feed it, it grows cold. And cold fire is nothing but ashes.

I walked across the deck, and as I walked, the smell grew stronger: sweat, old and new, hot and cold. Not just from work. From restlessness. From men whose minds are already full of themselves before their legs can move.

Mutiny doesn't smell of cannons. Mutiny doesn't smell of rum. Mutiny smells of sweat.

And I knew: When it comes, it won't come like a wave. It will come like a knife. Fast, close, dirty.

And then your name is either your lifeboat.

Or your gravestone.

A ship doesn't get quieter at night. It only becomes more honest. By day, you can hide behind work, behind the sun, behind the noise of tug-of-war and cursing. At night, all that remains is wood, breath, and that little crackling sound when someone crosses a line in their mind.

The guards were doubled up, but doubled up doesn't mean infallible. Doubled just means two pairs of eyes that both have to blink eventually. Briggs knew that. Tom knew that. I knew that. Keene knew that best of all.

I hardly slept. I lay there like a dog that's learned doors don't creak when no one touches them. And the ship creaked the whole time. It creaks because it's alive. Or because it's dying. Both sound the same when you're tired.

I went down to the hatch once, just to listen. Keene was sitting down there, bound, guarded, and yet there was this feeling that he was the real guard. He wasn't guarding his own life. He was guarding our nerves. He was just waiting for one of them to snap.

One of the guards—a thin fellow with dark circles under his eyes like blue rings under a barrel—stood there staring into the darkness as if he could pin Keene down with his gaze. I said quietly, "Don't stare. It's like with dogs. If you stare, it becomes a competition."

The guard flinched. "He's talking," he whispered.

"He mustn't," I said.

The guard swallowed. "He still talks. Quietly. If you... if you stand close enough."

There it was. Again. Standing close enough. People love close enough. Close enough is comfortable. Close enough is also the moment when someone puts something in your ear that later sounds like your own idea.

I went downstairs and stood in the darkness opposite Keene. He sat quietly, back straight, as if waiting for a damn visitor. His eyes gleamed in the dirty light like two nails.

"You are popular," he said quietly.

"You are bound," I said.

He grinned almost imperceptibly. "Being bound is just a posture."

"Shut your mouth," I said.

"You're repeating yourself," Keene said. "That's a sign of stress."

"That's a sign that you're annoying," I said.

He laughed softly, so briefly that it almost sounded like a cough. "They can smell it," he whispered. "All of them. They can smell that Briggs is dragging you through the night like a sack of bones. No port, no respite, nothing to hold onto. They can smell that he's draining you dry."

"Work doesn't empty you," I said. "Work keeps you alive."

"Work makes you quiet," Keene said. "And quiet men eventually start to hear their own thoughts. That's the moment they become brave. Or stupid."

I felt the back of my neck grow warm. Not from fear, but rather from the anger that arises when someone uses a truth to poison you.

"You want them to tip over," I said.

Keene tilted his head slightly. "I just want the truth to prevail," he said. "The truth is: Briggs isn't your father. He's your noose. And nooses eventually become too tight."

I looked at him for a long time. "You like to talk about knitting," I said. "You sound like a man who likes to watch others hang."

Keene grinned. "I like watching others finally understand."

I leaned forward slightly, not too close, just enough so he could really hear my voice. "When it goes off, Keene, it goes off for you too," I said. "You won't die a wise man. You'll die a chained bastard no one will miss."

His gaze remained calm. Too calm. "And you?" he whispered. "You will die as a name. And names are never missed. Names are used."

I got up and left before I knocked his teeth out. That's the trap. Keene doesn't win by killing you. Keene wins by making you forget yourself.

Up above, the night was damp and mild. The wind was there, but it acted as if it didn't want to. That's precisely the kind of wind that's dangerous. It makes you tired because it doesn't force you to be awake. Forced things keep you sharp. Comfortable things make you soft.

A small group stood at the bow. Again, those faces. Mouth, muscles, brain. They pretended to be changing watches, pretended to be talking, because that's what people talk about. But I saw their hands. The hands were silent. And when hands are silent while mouths are talking, there's usually a plan.

I went over, not like a guard, more like someone who just happened to need some fresh air. I positioned myself so that I was close enough to hear every word, but not so close that they immediately pulled up their masks.

The burly fellow said: "If Briggs continues like this, we'll soon have no men left, only bones."

The old man muttered: "And bones don't carry bags."

The silent bastard said nothing. He listened. That was the most dangerous thing.

I didn't clear my throat. I simply said, "You're talking about Briggs."

The three of them twitched slightly. Just a hint. They didn't want to twitch. They did it anyway.

The burly fellow grinned. "We're talking about wind," he said.

"Wind is honest," I said. "You are not."

The old man chuckled briefly, as if it were a joke. "You're very smartly dressed today, Bart."

"My name is not Bart," I said.

The word fell like a stone into water. Small, but you can see the ripples.

The burly fellow raised his eyebrows. "Oh," he said. "Now he'll look refined."

"There's no such thing as 'fine' here," I said. "There's only 'alive' and 'dead'."

The silent bastard finally spoke. His voice was calm, like a knife that doesn't shine. "And who decides that?" he asked.

That was the question. Not Briggs. Not Keene. The real question: Who?

I took my time. Time is sometimes a weapon. "The sea," I said.

The burly fellow snorted. "The sea doesn't decide anything. The sea only takes. And Briggs helps it."

"Briggs will keep you away from the water," I said.

The old man grinned crookedly. "Briggs keeps us away from the water, yes. But he also keeps us away from life. No harbor. No rum. No women's laughter. Just work and keeping your mouth shut."

"You want rum," I said.

"We want air," said the burly guy. "And a bit of a damn election."

"Election," I repeated. "You want to choose who shouts at you?"

The silent bastard looked at me as if he were feeling me up. "You're the one who held Keene," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"And Keene said..." began the broad guy, and then stopped because he realized he had given himself away.

I didn't smile. I didn't laugh. "Keene says a lot," I said. "Keene says so much that at some point you start to think it's your own head."

The old man raised his hands as if to belittle it. "One just listens. Only listens. He can talk."

"Yes," I said. "He can talk. And you can smell when he stinks of sweat."

The burly man took a step closer. Not aggressively, more like testing the situation. "What do you want?" he asked.

There it was again, that invisible leash: My name hangs right between us. They want to know if I'm Briggs, if I'm Keene, if I'm something else entirely. They want a flag. A direction. A permit.

I said, "I want you to still have teeth tomorrow."

The burly man laughed, but his laugh was thin. "You talk like Briggs."

"At least you've understood that Briggs isn't just an asshole," I said. "He's the only thing between you and the water."

The silent bastard glanced briefly at the railing, then back. "And what if Briggs is the problem?" he asked.

I felt the cold in my chest, that clear thing. "Then you are the greater one," I said.

The old man grimaced. "So you're taking his side."

"I'll take the side that isn't stupid," I said.

The burly man narrowed his eyes. "And if we still..." He left the sentence open, like a knife that hasn't yet stabbed.

"Then someone bleeds," I said. "And the sea takes him. And in the end you tell yourselves it was necessary. That's exactly how it starts."

The burly fellow stared at me, and I saw: he wanted me to open a door for him. I didn't open it. Doors are dangerous.

The silent bastard nodded slowly. Not in agreement. More like: he registered it. The old man scratched his chin, forced a grin. The burly fellow spat and said, "You're no comrade. You're a damned weight."

"Weight keeps ships stable," I said.

He growled and turned away. The group didn't disperse immediately, but they became quieter. Quieter means they were calculating. Not with numbers. With people.

I went over to Tom. He was standing in the shadows, as if he'd already overheard the whole conversation. "You couldn't get her to soften up," he said.

"I don't want them soft," I said. "I want them tired."

Tom grinned crookedly. "Tired men are dangerous."

"Yes," I said. "But they are also predictable. Unrest is worse."

The woman approached, quietly as always. "They will look for a reason," she said.

"They already have one," said Tom. "No one."

"Keene is just the match," she said. "The wood is already dry."

I looked across the deck, over the shadows, over the men who acted as if the night were just night. "And my name?" I asked.

She looked at me. "Your name is gasoline," she said.

That was an ugly sentence. And that's precisely why it was true.

The night dragged on. Watches changed. Footsteps creaked. Somewhere someone laughed briefly, alone, too loudly, as if testing their courage. And I smelled it again, everywhere: sweat. Not from work. From thoughts.

Mutiny smells of sweat.

And once you smell it, you can't get it out of your nose. No matter how much wind you let scream in your face.

In the morning, the air was so still it almost seemed offended. No storm, no rain, no god hinting at anything. Just this smooth, suspicious nothingness, in which men have too much time to hear their own thoughts. At sea, stillness is sometimes more dangerous than waves. Waves keep you busy. Stillness lets you plan.

Briggs got up early, as usual. He didn't get up because he was well-rested. Briggs doesn't sleep like normal people. Briggs falls over and gets up again, as if sleep were just another command. He went on his rounds, checking ropes, checking faces, checking the wind. And the faces... the faces were too still.

Too quiet is never good.

The group from the bug was back. Not all of them, but enough. They weren't standing in a circle; they were scattered, seemingly at random. That's the first stage: pretending there's no plan. Men without a plan really do stand at random. Men with a plan spread out in such a way that they block paths without it being noticeable.

Tom saw it. I saw it. The woman smelled it even before she saw it.

"Today," Tom said quietly to me, without looking at me. "Today they'll try."

"Yes," I said.

The woman approached, holding a cloth in her hand as if it were her sword. "You talked less this morning," she said.

"Because talking costs energy," I said.

"And because words betray," said Tom.

We stood on the sidelines, pretending to work. That's the joke: while mutiny grows, everyone has to act like it's just a normal day. Like you're not looking at your own people as enemies. It makes you sick. You want to see the enemy so you can hit them. But here, the enemy is the same hand that was holding the rope for you yesterday.

Briggs went to the hatch. He wanted to see Keene. Perhaps to check if the bastard was still talking. Perhaps to remind the men that there was an enemy who shouldn't be beneath them. Perhaps simply to reassure himself that he had some control. Control was Briggs's drug.

As Briggs walked to the hatch, something moved. Not loudly. Not quickly. But noticeably. As if a few men simultaneously shifted their breathing. That's the moment. Not the blow. The breath.

The broad-shouldered man took a step to the side, right where Briggs would be returning. The old man with the rotten teeth spat, as if trying to clear his mouth of nervousness. The silent bastard stood near the block where the ropes ran, his hand already where you'd quickly grab someone if you wanted to restrain them.

I took a few steps, slowly, as if I'd accidentally gotten closer. Tom did the same from the other side. The woman stayed back a little, but her eyes were everywhere.

Briggs disappeared briefly into the hatch.

And then, as he came back up, it happened. No big shout. No drumming. The burly man stepped forward and said loudly enough for everyone to hear: "We need to talk."

Silence.

In such silence you can even hear the sea breathing against the planks.

Briggs stopped. He looked at the man as if the man had just asked if he could recite a poem. "Talking is for night," Briggs said.

The broad-shouldered man raised his chin. "It's time to talk now."

Briggs' gaze swept over the others. He saw the distribution. He saw the deadlock. Briggs isn't stupid. Briggs knew immediately: This isn't a conversation. This is an attempt to put him in a bind.

"You want rum," said Briggs.

The old man laughed briefly. "We want more than rum."

"You want a port," said Briggs.

"We want air," said the broad-shouldered man.

"You want to decide," said Briggs.

The silent bastard said, "Yes."

There it was. The "yes" was like a knife finally touching the skin.

Briggs nodded once. "Making decisions takes work," he said. "And you don't want work."

The burly man took a step closer. "We want to live," he said. "Not just function."

Briggs' mouth twitched slightly. "Life is functioning," he said.

A few laughed nervously. No one knew if they were allowed to laugh. Laughing in such a moment is like coughing in smoke: it gives you away.

The broad fellow said: "You'll keep us without a harbor until we fall over. And then you'll say it was the sea. But it's you."

Briggs remained calm. Too calm. "I'm keeping you away from hanging," he said. "The crown is near. Harbor is death."

"Perhaps," said the old man. "But death is also about continuing like this."

"At least you won't die of stupidity," said Briggs.

That was his mistake. Not because it was wrong. Because it offended her. Men can handle the truth. What they can't handle is feeling treated like children.

The burly man blushed. Sweat glistened on his forehead. There it was again. Mutiny smells of sweat. "You're calling us stupid," he said.

"I call you tired," said Briggs.

"No," said the burly fellow. "You're calling us stupid. And I'm fed up."

He raised his hand.

Not for hitting. For giving a signal.

And at that moment, three men moved simultaneously.

The silent bastard grabbed the block rope, intending to untie it and create chaos. The old man took a step toward Briggs' side, as if he were going to grab him. The broad fellow himself charged at Briggs as if he were simply going to run him over.

Tom jumped. Not at the big guy. At the silent bastard. Tom's always where the real damage happens. He grabbed the guy by the arm, yanked him back, and the guy slammed his back against a crate. A dull thud. A short cry.

Briggs did not move away. Briggs stepped forward.

He didn't give the burly man a heroic fight. He gave him a sobering lesson. Briggs kicked the man in the shins, hard, right where it pulls your legs out. The burly man buckled, and in the same motion, Briggs grabbed him by the collar and rammed him against the railing.

The wood creaked. The man gasped.

The old man reached for Briggs' arm, trying to hold him. I stepped in, grabbed the old man by the wrist, and twisted. Not until it broke. Just until he realized: You're old, and your courage is nothing but rum in your blood. He yelped, and I pushed him back.

A cry arose from the crowd. Not of heroism. Of panic. The mutiny had just become visible. And visible means: now everyone must decide which side they are on. This is the moment when men die because they hesitate too long.

"Back!" yelled Briggs.

A few stepped back. A few stepped forward. One actually pulled a knife. A knife on his own deck. That's like spitting in his own mother. But fear makes anything possible.

The woman stepped forward, faster than I expected, and she wasn't holding a knife. She was holding a bucket of tarry water, which she must have fetched from somewhere. She poured it over the knife-wielding man's hand. Hot, sticky stuff that burned like hell. The man screamed, dropped the knife, threw up his hand, and at that moment Tom kicked him in the stomach.

The man went downstairs.

That wasn't heroism. That was craftsmanship. And craftsmanship wins battles.

Briggs still held the burly man by the railing, his hand on his collar like a rope. "One more," Briggs said quietly, "and I'll throw you."

The burly man gasped, his eyes wide, sweaty and fearful. He was no longer a leader. He was just flesh, realizing: water is near.

The old man staggered, clutching his wrist, cursing. The silent bastard lay on the ground, Tom on top of him, and Tom was probably whispering something in his ear, something ugly, something that would break him without anyone seeing it.

The crowd stood there, scattered. Keene was down below, and I knew he was listening. He didn't need to see. He only needed to hear. Voices. Footsteps. Sweat.

"Enough!" I yelled.

Not because I like to shout. Because sometimes a scream is the only nail that will tighten a board again.

A few heads turned towards me. My name hung in the air, unspoken. The beard. The one that held Keene. The one that wasn't bought. And I realized: This is the moment Keene wanted. The moment they look at me and think: Tell us what we are.

I said, as loudly as I could: "If you crash Briggs, you crash the ship. And if the ship crashes, the sea will devour you. You can choose, yes. But you cannot choose whether the sea forgives you."

Silence. Heavy.

Briggs let go of the burly man, but he stayed close. "Back to work," Briggs said. "Or overboard."

A few stepped back, quickly, relieved that someone was giving them orders again. Orders are convenient when you're afraid. Others stood still, staring, snorting, wanting something more, but now they were alone. And alone, mutiny suddenly isn't brave anymore. Alone, it's just stupid.

Tom pulled the silent bastard up and tied his hands. The man spat, tried to say something, but Tom simply slapped him across the mouth with his open hand. No blood, just silence.

The woman stood there, tar water dripping from the bucket, her gaze cold. She said nothing. She didn't need to say anything. Her gaze was a judgment.

The burly man stood unsteadily, clutching his shin, breathing heavily. His sweat reeked of defeat. Mutiny smells of sweat, yes. But so does defeat.

The crowd slowly dispersed. Men returned to their duties as if they hadn't just tried to overthrow their own leader. As if they hadn't just torn open the thin veneer between order and bloodshed.

Briggs stood in the middle of the deck, calm, as if it had all been just a minor thunderstorm. He looked at me. No thank you. No "well done." Just a look that said: I saw it. I know what your name just did.

I exhaled. My hands weren't trembling, but something inside was very awake.

The woman stepped next to me. Quietly. "This was just the beginning," she said.

I nodded. "Yes."

She looked towards Luke. "And Keene has now learned what it smells like when it's almost tipping over."

I felt salt on my lip. Sweat. Maybe mine. Maybe someone else's. It didn't matter. The scent hung in the air like a promise.

Mutiny smells of sweat.

And today we all inhaled it.

Every port a farewell

The day after a near-successful mutiny tastes like cold ashes. Not because you were on fire—but because you know you could be again. The men went back to their work, yes. They knotted, they scrubbed, they acted as if they were suddenly obedient dogs again, just waiting for someone to whistle. But you could smell it: the trust was torn like an old sail. You can patch it, you can sew it, but if the wind comes strong enough, it will tear again right there.

Briggs said little. He had the three ringleaders detained, not theatrically, not with speeches. Just firmly. A few hands tied, a few looks that said: Whoever does it again, swims. The burly fellow was no longer a leader, just a man with aching bones and a new fear that constricted his throat at night. The old man with the rotten teeth still spat out jokes, but his jokes were smaller now, because he'd realized his humor offered no protection from water. The silent bastard no longer looked at anyone. Silence can be brave, but in his case it was now only shame, and shame is like rust: it slowly eats you away.

Keene stayed below, bound, guarded, and I swear, the ship still smelled of him. Like a dead animal in the wall that you can't see, but you feel with every breath. A few men wanted to kill him. Not out of justice. Out of relief. People often mistake relief for morality. They just want the noise in their head to stop.

Briggs didn't want a quick death. Briggs wanted control. And control always has that ugly aftertaste: you're keeping something alive just to use it later. That's almost worse than a knife.

Land came into view that evening. At first, just a dark line, like a scar on the horizon. Then palm trees, then a strip of sand, then that feeling every sailor knows, no matter how tough he tries: the ground is calling. Not romantically. Not like in the songs. More like when your feet tell you: I'm fed up with wood.

"Harbor," one of them murmured, as if it were a prayer.

Briggs didn't answer immediately. He let them savor the thought for a moment, so he could then wring their necks. Then he said, "No port."

Murmurs. Immediately. Sweat. Immediately. I heard it like a crackling sound.

"No port," Briggs repeated. "Only water. Only supplies. Quickly."

"Why?" cried one who still felt brave, because the mutiny was "almost" over and "almost" already counts as a victory in the minds of many men.

Briggs turned to him. "Because every port is a farewell," Briggs said. "And farewells make you stupid."

I almost laughed. Not because it's funny. Because it's so damn true it hurts. Ports aren't homecomings. Ports are just places where you briefly pretend to be normal, when in reality you just want to buy something: rum, food, women, oblivion. And as soon as you have that, you have to get out again, because the stories are faster than you are. Your name is already running through the alleys before you've even taken your first step onto land.

We didn't go to a big city. We looked for a cove, a dirty little spot where the sand was littered with trash and people wouldn't look at you because they'd learned that looking away sometimes meant living longer. Boats were lowered, men rowed ashore, fetched water, fruit, salt meat, whatever they could get their hands on. No bartering with receipts. Just exchange, threats, quick hands, and swift eyes.

I went along. Not because I love the smell of land. But because I wanted to see how my men would change when they felt solid ground again. At sea, you're in a box of rules. On land, you suddenly think you can choose again. And choosing is dangerous when you've just learned how close water is.

The beach smelled of rotting vegetation and dirt that had lain long in the sun. A few huts stood there, crooked as if they themselves had no desire to be upright. Children stared at us as if at an approaching storm. Women pulled the doors shut. Men pretended to be busy, and that was the most honest activity in the world: to be busy when armed strangers come.

Tom went ahead, his gaze cutting through everything. He had this look on his face: no talking today, just taking. Behind him, one of the boys was hauling barrels, and I saw the boy smile briefly as he took his first step into the sand. Such a silly little smile. Soil. He'd missed it. It made him soft. Softness is just as dangerous on land as it is at sea.

An old trader emerged from a hut, holding up one hand as if he could stop weapons with it. In the other hand he held a bottle, as if rum were some kind of diplomacy. "Good price," he said, his voice sounding like that of a man who had survived many "good prices."

Tom took the bottle from him, smelled it, and grimaced. "Good price for you," said Tom.

The old man grinned nervously. "Everything has a price," he said.

I almost laughed again. Everything is a price. Yes. Even you.

We filled up with water, took fruit, took what we needed. Nothing more, because Briggs didn't want us to stay any longer. Staying longer means: someone sees you. Someone remembers your face. Someone runs to the next officer, the next soldier, the next bastard with a certificate and seal and says: I've seen her. And then you're no longer just a ship. You're a hunt.

While the men hauled, I saw groups forming. Again. Not exactly mutiny. But the kind of grouping that reeks of possibility. One whispered. One laughed. One looked at me, as if testing whether I was listening. My name wasn't just on deck. It was also here on the beach, among the palm trees and flies. A few locals had already heard it; I could see it in their eyes: that mixture of fear and curiosity. Fear is honest. Curiosity is foolish.

A girl—no longer a child, but not yet a woman, in that in-between stage where the world always seems to devour her first—stood at the edge and stared at my beard as if it were an animal. I stared back, briefly, and she didn't look away. That was courage or stupidity. Maybe both.

"You are him," she said softly. No question mark.

"I am nobody," I said.

She snorted. "Nobody doesn't have a beard," she said.

That was humor, straight from the gutter. I grinned briefly, even though I didn't mean to. "And what are you?" I asked.

"Smart enough not to get too close," she said.

"Then you're smarter than my men," I said.

She watched the men standing by the water, laughing, suddenly acting important again because land made them feel like they were masters of themselves once more. "Your men are sad," she said.

"Why sad?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Because they keep leaving," she said. "And every departure is like a little death."

I would have loved to give her a coin, just for that sentence. But coins don't make you smarter. They only make you greedier. So I said nothing.

We were there for maybe two hours, maybe less. Time in the countryside is also dangerous because it flows differently. You suddenly hear voices again, animals, the rustling of leaves.

Things that aren't wood and wind. Your mind relaxes a little. And that's precisely when stupidity sneaks in like a rat.

One of my men—one who yesterday still wanted "election"—already had rum in his hand. I saw it before he drank. That glint in his eyes. That "just a minute." Just a minute is always the beginning of the end. He raised the bottle, grinned at his buddy, and in that grin lay so much hunger that I felt a little sick.

I went up to him, took the bottle from his hand without asking. "Not here," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. "Why not? We're on land."

"That's exactly why," I said.

He wanted to protest. I saw it in his mouth, in his tongue, which longed to taste courage again. Then he saw my gaze, saw my beard, saw the men around us, saw Tom, who stood not far away, pretending not to listen. And the man chose life. He spat and nodded. But his sweat smelled of resentment.

Every port is a farewell, Briggs had said. And I understood what he meant. Not just farewell to land. Farewell to the idea that you can arrive anywhere. You never arrive. You only leave, again and again, until eventually the leaving catches up with you and you're no longer fast enough.

As we pushed the boats back into the water, I heard a voice behind me, quiet, not my men: "You're coming back?"

I turned around. The girl was still standing there.

I said, "Maybe."

She laughed briefly. "Perhaps it's a word for liar," she said.

I grinned because she was right. "Then I'm a liar," I said.

"I know that," she said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be alive."

We rowed back, loaded the supplies, hauled the boats up again, secured the ropes, hoisted the sails. The ship took us back in like a dirty belly. And as the shoreline shrank, I felt that thing inside me that many men can't name: relief. Not because I hate land. Because land reminds you that other lives exist. And other lives soften you.

At sea you can be tough and convince yourself that it's strength. On land you realize it's just another form of escape.

I stood at the stern and watched the beach disappear. Not tragic. Not poetic. Simply gone. Like everything else.

Every port is a farewell.

And every goodbye is a small death you inflict on yourself so that you don't get the big one – not yet.

As soon as the beach is gone, the ship starts breathing again like an animal that knows you. Land has sounds that distract you: birds, voices, leaves. At sea, you only have wood, wind, and the annoying noise of your own thoughts, which finally have space again because nothing drowns them out.

The men stood at the railing, acting as if they despised the coast. As if land were something soft, something for peasants and priests. But I saw their fingers. How they clung to the wood, a heartbeat too long. How their glances slid back, as if they wanted to burn the sand into their eyes one last time. No one says: I miss solid ground. That sounds like weakness. So they say: Shitty harbor. And mean the opposite.

Briggs had the sails pulled taut, as if he could pull heads straight with them. He was even colder than usual after going ashore. It wasn't the coldness of a man who's freezing. It was the coldness of a man who knows that land is a knife you hold to your own throat because it feels so familiar.

"Counting," said Briggs.

The word spread like wildfire. Counting means: Who's missing? Who's been stupid? Who's used freedom as an excuse?

The men lined up, more or less. Some were already swaying, even though Briggs had forbidden rum. You don't even need rum to sway when you're already half somewhere else inside. And then I heard it: that little gap in the line. Not immediately visible, but palpable. A space as empty as a guilty conscience.

"Where is Harker?" asked Briggs.

No one answered immediately. Because everyone was doing the same calculation at that moment: if someone is missing, I could be the next one they're looking for. And being wanted on a pirate ship is rarely a compliment.

Tom looked down the row as if he were reading faces like cards. "The skinny one," said Tom. "The one who was talking big yesterday."

I remembered. The guy who'd talked about elections as if this were a parliament and not a floating heap of violence. He'd already looked on the beach like someone who'd rather die in a hut than spend another night in the belly of this ship.

"He was by the water," someone murmured.

"He was at the rum," said another.

Briggs' gaze pierced through her. "He was running away," Briggs said.

No one laughed. Not even blackface. This wasn't a joke. This was a farewell no one had announced. And that's exactly what ports are like: you think you're only taking water, and suddenly the port takes a man from you.

"He didn't get the bottle," someone said quietly, and I didn't even know if it was an apology or a reproach.

Briggs took a step forward. "He has left the ship," he said calmly. "He has left you. He has left me. He has sold himself to the sand."

"Perhaps he will come back," said the old man with the rotten teeth, and his attempt to sound light was so thin that it was see-through.

Briggs looked at him. "Back where?" Briggs asked. "Into the cage? Into the wind? Into fear? He has chosen."

Election. There it was again. And now it didn't sound courageous anymore. It sounded dirty. It sounded like an excuse.

Tom spat. "He won't live long on land," Tom said. "Either he'll be hanged because he knows us, or he'll be stabbed because he has nothing."

"Or he'll become a farmer," someone muttered, and then there was a short laugh, a few dry sounds, because the idea of one of our men being a farmer is as absurd as a shark wearing a hat.

Briggs raised his hand, and the laughter died instantly. "Anyone who still believes that a harbor is salvation can just jump into the water and make it faster," he said.

I looked at the men. Some had anger in their eyes. Not at Harker. At Briggs. At me. At themselves. Anger is easier than disappointment. Disappointment is the feeling that you still harbored some hope. And hope is utter garbage here.

"He betrayed us," one of them said.

"No," said the woman, who had suddenly appeared behind the row as if she had grown out of the wood. "He saved himself."

A few heads turned. Some looked at her as if she had just said something indecent. Because "rescue" is a nice word, but one you don't like to use if you tell yourself every day that you don't need rescuing.

Briggs said nothing to her. He didn't respect her like a gentleman. He respected her like a tool that functioned. And perhaps that's the only kind of respect that's real on a ship like that.

We sailed on. The beach had long since become just a line, then nothing. And with it, Harker vanished, as if he had never existed. That's the second lie of harbors: you think everything somehow stays inside you. But the sea washes away names, and men help it along because otherwise they'd go mad.

In the afternoon I went down to see Keene. Not out of curiosity. More like pressing on a tooth to check if it still hurts. Keene was sitting there, restrained, guarded, and his smile looked like something that fed itself.

"One is gone," I said.

Keene blinked slowly. "I smelled it," he said.

"You have a great sense of smell," I said. "You can even smell things you desire."

Keene grinned a little wider. "Ports make men soft," he said. "Soft men slip up. That's not my fault."

"You are a virus," I said.

"I am just the truth in a pretty dress," said Keene. "And you all love pretty dresses. Even you. Your name is a pretty dress."

I felt my arm tug beneath the bandage. Not the wound itself. More the reminder of how close a knife can be. "Harker didn't leave because of you," I said.

Keene shrugged. "Maybe not directly," he said. "But he's gone because of the air. And air comes with thoughts. And thoughts..." He smiled. "...are contagious."

I went back upstairs before I rearranged his face. Keene wanted me to explode. Keene thrives on explosions because explosions always produce smoke, and in the smoke he can disappear again.

On deck, the wind was steady, and that was almost the worst thing. Steady makes you lazy. Steady makes you tired. Tired makes you vulnerable. The boy who had almost gone overboard was knotting like a machine, and I could see from his jaw that he was clenching himself to keep from shaking again. The old man was less joking. The burly fellow who yesterday had wanted to give a face to the mutiny was now tied to the mast, sweating and staring out at the water as if wondering whether the sea might actually be a door.

I went to him. Not out of sympathy. Out of curiosity. The smell of sweat was particularly strong on him. Sweat of fear and sweat of shame. A nice mix if you want a man to mess up.

"You wanted air," I said.

He spat. "Fuck you," he said.

I nodded. "That's air too," I said.

He raised his head and stared at me, and there was nothing heroic left in his gaze. Only this stark truth: I didn't want to die like a dog. And now I sit here like a dog.

"Harker did it," he murmured.

"Harker is gone," I said. "That's not the same."

"He is free," the man said, and the word "free" sounded like a prayer he was nailing to his own skull.

"Free from what?" I asked. "From us? Yes. From hunger? No. From fear? No. From men like us who will eventually return to land? Not that either."

He swallowed. His shoulders sank slightly. And there it was: farewell. Not to the harbor. To his own fairy tale. Every harbor takes some kind of fairy tale away from you, if you look closely.

Later, I stood at the stern again. The water trailed behind us like a dirty flag. And I thought of the girl on the beach, of her words about walking and a little death. Maybe she was right. Maybe every shore leave is just a place where you briefly die and then rise again, only dirtier. You leave something behind. A man. A thought. An illusion.

I heard my name spoken somewhere up front, half reverently, half mockingly. A name as a matchstick. A name as a shield. A name as an invitation to all who think they can hide behind it.

And I understood: Not only ports are farewells. A name is one too. You say goodbye to who you were as soon as others call you what they need you to be.

Briggs stood at the helm, eyes fixed on the horizon as if staring into the future until it blinked. Tom leaned against the mast, silent, and his silence said: This was just a taste. The woman walked across the deck, wiping her hands clean as if one could wipe away sweat without it returning.

The wind remained steady. The sea remained calm. And that's precisely why I felt uneasy.

Because you learn: Evil doesn't always come with thunder. Sometimes it comes with a quiet, orderly farewell.

The night after one of us stayed on the beach, the stars were clearer than usual. That's another one of life's jokes: you lose a man, and the heavens act as if this is the perfect moment to bestow beauty upon you. Beauty is sometimes just a form of mockery.

The men spoke more quietly. Not because they had suddenly become thoughtful like philosophers, but because they were calculating inwardly. Each one was calculating: If Harker could leave, I could too. If I could, why don't I? And if I don't, am I being cowardly or wise? These are the questions that linger after leaving a port. Every port takes something from you. This time it took a man from us and planted an idea in everyone else's head. An idea is harder to hold onto than Keene.

I went back down to Keene's again, even though I'd resolved not to. Keene's like rum: you know it's not good for you, and yet you go anyway, because you want to test whether you can handle it.

He sat there, his face still clean despite being handcuffed. As if he could find a tissue even in the dirt. The guards stood before him, alert, but their eyes were tired. Tiredness is Keene's best friend.

"One less," Keene said quietly, before I could even say anything.

"One less," I repeated.

"This is the beginning," he said.

"That's nothing," I said.

Keene grinned. "You're lying," he said. "And you're bad at it when you're tired."

I stepped closer so he could see my boots. "You want me to take care of it," I said.

Keene nodded. "Of course I want that. Take care of each other. Argue. Love each other. Hate each other. Anything is better than balance. Balance is your only shield."

"You are tied up," I said again, because I needed to hear it.

Keene glanced at the restraints and chuckled softly. "Restraints hold muscles," he said. "Not thoughts. And thoughts..." He raised his eyes to me. "...are already up there."

I wanted to tell him to shut up, but I'd said that often enough, and each time it felt like I was shouting against the wind. So I said something else: "You're going to die."

Keene shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "But not alone. And not without leaving something behind first."

"What?" I asked.

Keene smiled, and it was a bad smile because it was so quiet. "A few little goodbyes," he said.

I went upstairs because I suddenly felt my hands itching. And when your hands itch, you want violence. Violence is convenient. Violence is clear. But violence doesn't get rid of everything. It just makes room for the next problem.

Up above, the night was still. The watches patrolled their rounds. The wind brushed across the deck like a tired dog. And yet, it still smelled of the harbor. Not of salt. Of earth. Of wood smoke from huts. Of that small promise: Out there, another life awaits.

I went to the mast where the burly fellow sat bound. He wasn't asleep. He was staring into the darkness, and his eyes were red, not from rum, but from something worse: thoughts.

"You're awake," I said.

"I'm dreaming," he murmured, without looking at me.

"Of what?" I asked.

He laughed briefly, bitterly. "From a bed," he said. "From a woman who doesn't scream when I come in. From a plate of food that doesn't taste of rope."

I nodded. "And of freedom."

He turned his head and looked at me, and I saw in his eyes that naked thing: a man who briefly believed he could be the hero of his own story. "Harker did it," he said quietly. "He's out. He laughed at us all."

"Maybe he was crying," I said.

The burly man snorted. "He's not crying. None of us are crying."

"You're crying right now," I said.

He flinched as if I'd punched him in the face. His eyes blinked faster, and he swallowed hard. "Fuck you," he whispered again, but this time it didn't sound like anger. More like shame.

I let him. Not because I was being nice. Because I knew: Shame makes men unpredictable. And an unpredictable man on board is like a loose cannonball: He rolls around and smashes everything he hits.

Tom came up to me as I was walking away from the mast. "You feed him," Tom said.

"I'll check him," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Examining is also feeding. Everything you look at gets bigger."

"What do you want?" I asked.

Tom pointed towards the helm. Briggs stood there, still, his hands on the wood, his gaze fixed on the darkness. "Briggs will hang him," Tom said. "Or throw him overboard. And then the crew will breathe again. Briefly."

"Short," I repeated.

Tom nodded. "Because Harker is missing. And because Keene is still breathing."

I looked up at the sky. Stars. Clear. Indifferent. "Every port is a farewell," I said. "But perhaps every farewell is also a beginning."

Tom looked at me as if I had just written a poem. "Stop it," he said.

I grinned. "See? Another goodbye."

He wanted to laugh, but didn't. "What will you do if another one runs away?" he asked.

I answered honestly, because the night is honest: "Then there are fewer of us," I said. "And fewer means: dying faster."

"Or live faster," Tom muttered.

"Life isn't fast," I said. "Dying is fast. Life is slow."

The woman approached, silently. "The port has taken more from you than just a man," she said.

"What else?" I asked.

She looked at me. "An illusion," she said. "The illusion that you stick together because you want to. You stick together because you have to. And as soon as there's a 'have to,' there's also an 'I don't want to.'"

I felt those words echoing inside me. Because they were true. And truth is sometimes worse than Keene's poison, because you can't just brush it off.

The next morning, something small happened, but it was significant enough for me to notice. One of the men, who usually came to duty dutifully, suddenly stood at the water's edge, gazing at the sea, his bag packed. Not large. Just the essentials. A knife. A piece of bread. A small bundle. He didn't want to fight. He didn't want to talk. He just wanted to disappear.

I went over to him. "What are you doing?" I asked.

He looked at me, and there was no rebellion in his eyes. Only weariness. "I can't go on," he said.

"You can't choose that," I said.

He shrugged. "Yes," he said. "Harker voted."

"Harker may have already lost," I said.

The man smiled sadly. "Then I'd rather lose there than here," he said.

Then came the farewell. No harbor, no sand, just a decision in their minds. And I understood: The harbor was no longer outside. The harbor was inside them.

Briggs came over, saw the bag, saw the man, saw me. He simply said, "Put it down."

The man hesitated. Sweat glistened on his forehead. Mutiny smelled of sweat, yes. But so did escape.

"Put them down," Briggs repeated. No noise. Just weight.

The man put the bag down. His shoulders slumped. He looked as if something had been pulled out of his chest.

Briggs said, "You're staying."

The man whispered: "And what if I don't want to?"

Briggs looked at him. "Then you're dead," said Briggs.

So simple. So ugly. So honest.

The man swallowed. And stayed.

I looked at him and thought: Every port is a farewell. And sometimes the worst farewell isn't to the land, but to your own hope that you can still choose at all.

The sea does not forgive weakness.

And she won't forgive you either if you think a port would be a way out.

Gold makes men ugly

Gold is really just a metal. Cold. Stupid. It shines so idiots have something to stare at. And yet it makes men vomit faster than rum. Rum makes you stupid, but gold makes you repulsive. Rum steals your memories. Gold steals your character.

We hadn't even touched the stuff before it was already there. In their eyes. In their voices. In the way someone suddenly said "we" when they meant "I." Gold is like a rumor you nail to your brain: You'll soon be rich. And then the first people start acting like they already are.

It started with a map. A dirty, greasy map, more stains than lines. One of the men had pulled it from a hut somewhere during their last coastal stop, along with a small bundle of tobacco and a story he was telling too loudly. Stories are a kind of currency, too. Sometimes they're worthless. Sometimes they buy you a whole night of stupidity.

"There," he said, tapping the map as if the paper were sacred. "There's a barge. Small convoy. Two merchant ships. Light. Fast. And full."

"Full of what?" asked Tom.

The man grinned, and in that grin lay the first ugliness. "With gold," he said.

I heard the word like a blow. Not because I love it. But because I knew what it would do. The word "gold" is like a knife you throw into a team. Some catch it by the handle. Some catch it by the blade.

Briggs picked up the card, looked at it, without enthusiasm. Briggs doesn't get excited about gold. Briggs gets excited about control. "Cards lie," he said.

"But gold doesn't lie," one murmured, and a few laughed softly, as if they had just said something clever.

I looked at the men. There it was: that gleam that doesn't come from the sun. That thin film on your eyes that makes you look like a pig before a trough. And these were the same men who yesterday had acted as if they didn't care about anything. Yesterday they were tired. Today they were greedy. Greed awakens. And awakening makes you dangerous.

The captain—the one praying—approached as if he had heard "gold" in the wind. He stood up, cleared his throat, and his voice was suddenly louder than himself. "We must be careful," he said. "We mustn't..."

Tom interrupted him: "We're not allowed to do what? Not get rich?"

Laughter. The captain turned red, and I saw him inwardly searching for the next Bible verse to appear manly again.

Briggs said nothing to Tom. He let Tom do it because Tom sometimes channeled the crew's greed better than any command. You give them a joke, and they run in the direction you want.

"Gold makes men ugly," I said loudly enough for those nearby to hear.

A few heads turned. One grinned. "Then we're finally suitable for the crown," he said.

More laughter. Black. Dirty. And yet: there was nervousness in the laughter. Because they knew I meant it.

I walked away from the group and stood at the stern. Water, wind, the monotonous crashing of the waves. These things are honest. Gold isn't. Gold is a mirror that shows you what you could be if you sold your backbone.

Tom came along behind. "You sound like the woman," he said.

"The woman is right," I said.

Tom snorted. "Law is boring. Gold is exciting."

"It's exciting when the blade is at your throat," I said.

"That's our everyday life," said Tom.

I grinned briefly. "Exactly."

We sailed on, searching for our course. Briggs made the men work, but you noticed: the work was different. Before, you worked because you had to. Now they worked as if they wanted to prove to themselves that they deserved the gold. Earn it. As if the world were fair. As if gold were a reward and not a curse.

Below deck, with Keene, things changed. The guards whispered more. Not about mutiny this time. About shares. About "if we get this." About "then I'm outta here." That was the ugly part: gold turned escape into a plan, not just a fantasy.

I went downstairs because I wanted to know if Keene could smell it too. He smelled everything.

He sat there, bound, and when I arrived, he smiled as if he had just received a present. "Ah," he said softly. "You reek of hope."

"Shut your mouth," I said.

Keene laughed almost inaudibly. "You've found something," he said.

I stepped closer. "You won't find anything. You're sitting."

"I can hear," Keene said. "And the men up there... they're loud in their heads, even when they're silent. Gold makes them loud."

"Gold makes them stupid," I said.

"Gold makes them honest," Keene said. "It just shows what's already there. Fear. Envy. Hunger. And that sweet feeling: I could be the one who decides."

I felt my teeth clench briefly. Because he hit me again. Keene always hits someone. He's like a splinter, always seeking out the same wound.

"Briggs will control it," I said.

Keene raised his eyebrows. "Briggs controls the wind? Briggs controls men? Briggs only controls as long as you believe you deserve nothing better."

"We don't earn anything at all," I said.

Keene grinned. "You say that now. Say it again when the gold lies on the deck. When it clinks. When it shines. When it tells you: You could be more than just a beard in the wind."

I went back upstairs because I felt my arm itching, and I didn't want to be Keene's victory again. He thrives on you mentally pulling him up with you, even though he's tied down.

The air was heavy up there. Not because of smoke. Because of anticipation. Anticipation is also sweat, only sweeter.

We spotted them in the afternoon. Two sails on the horizon, small, innocent, like lambs unaware that wolves exist. We adjusted our course slightly, taking the wind so we could go faster but remain inconspicuous. Briggs ran everything like clockwork. No cheering. No speeches. Just short, firm orders.

The captain prayed again. Of course. He always prays when something happens that's bigger than his courage. I heard him mutter, and I heard a few men laugh quietly. Not disrespectfully, more like: That's our mascot. Our little theater. God never came aboard, but the captain pretends that God is at least listening to him, so he's not completely alone.

"No stupid stuff," Briggs told everyone. "No shouting. No early shots. We'll go for it when I say so."

One of them muttered: "Gold, boys."

I saw how the faces changed. Jaws hardened. Eyes narrowed. Hands went to knives, to ropes, to cannons. And suddenly there was this ugly beauty: men are most beautiful when they believe they are about to get something. Not because it is noble. Because it is so pathetically real.

Tom stood beside me, examining the blade as if it were an old friend. "If we get her," he said, "things are going to get loud again."

"The noise isn't the problem," I said.

"Then what?" asked Tom.

I looked at the men. At the boy who still wanted to prove he wasn't weak. At the old man who threw jokes like knives. At the burly fellow who sat bound to the mast and now looked up again, as if suddenly hopeful. At the guards watching over Keene, who were already talking about taking their share.

"After the gold," I said, "things get ugly."

Tom grinned crookedly. "We're already ugly."

"No," I said. "That's just filth. What's ugly is when you look at your comrade and see only your own reflection in his face."

Tom was silent for a moment. That rarely happens. Then he said: "Then we have to be quick."

"Fast is always better," I said.

The sails ahead grew larger. The crashing of the waves against her bow couldn't be heard yet, but I imagined it. Like a heartbeat. Like an animal still believing it's safe.

Briggs gave the signal to load the cannons. Powder, balls, fuse. The men worked like mad, but this time it wasn't just discipline. It was that sweet delusion: After this, we'll be rich.

I thought of Harker on the beach. How he had left because he wanted air. Now they all wanted air, but in the form of gold. As if metal could buy you the wind.

Gold makes men ugly.

And we were all in the process of disfiguring ourselves before the first shot was even fired.

Briggs let us creep up on her like lice on a warm blanket. No heroic chants, no roaring "Arrr," no theatrics. Just wind, angles, patience. Patience is a disease on a ship like that, but Briggs has it. He has it because he knows: An early shot isn't courage, an early shot is stupidity with gunpowder.

The two merchant ships lay out there, spick and span, so spick and span that you knew just by looking at them: they had something to lose. And those who have something to lose smell different. Not of sweat. Of fear trying to remain impeccably dressed.

We came closer until I could see her planks, until I heard the lapping of her waves. On the bow, a few men stood, clinging to the railing as if the wood were their mother. One pointed over at us. Another ran. You could see the moment they realized: This isn't a passing ship. This is a mouthful of teeth.

The captain next to me was muttering something to his god again. I only heard snatches, like bones in a sack. I felt like slapping him, not because of the religion, but because of the noise. Prayers are like squeaky doors. They make you nervous.

Briggs raised his hand.

Everyone fell silent.

You could almost hear the men's saliva coming to their mouths in greed. Greed makes sounds. A soft smacking. A click of the tongue. Breathing that's too fast.

Briggs pointed at the cannons.

The fuses were ready, but not yet lit. That was the torture: you see the target, you smell it, you know you're about to strike, and yet you still have to wait like a dog on command.

"Now," said Briggs.

No shouting. Just this one word.

The first volley didn't tear open the sky, it tore open the illusion. A cannon shot is the opposite of diplomacy. Diplomacy says: Let's talk. A cannon says: You're talking to water now.

Wood splintered against the merchant ship, a piece of railing flew off, and I saw a man fall, not dead, but suddenly very quiet. The second ship turned, trying to get away. Getting away is the instinct of people who have never learned that you can't outrun the wind. The wind chases you, and if it doesn't catch you, people will.

"Grapple hook!" someone yelled, and there it was again: the crew came alive. Not alive like in songs. Alive like rats when you tear open a sack.

Ropes flew. Hooks caught. Wood creaked. Men jumped.

I didn't jump first. I never jumped first. Not out of cowardice. Out of taste. I like to briefly see stupidity move before I throw myself in.

Tom was, of course, the first. Tom's always the first when someone starts screaming. He landed on their deck like a damned punishment, and his knife went to work immediately. Not wildly, not beautifully. Just working. One man went down, another clutched his stomach, and suddenly the merchant ship was no longer a merchant ship, but simply a stage for blood.

I crossed over when the ropes were secure. My boot struck their planks, and the smell changed. Other ships smell different. More soap. More hope. More foolish trust. Those are the best ships to plunder because their death is still a surprise. Surprise makes them slow.

An officer approached me, impeccably dressed, saber in hand, his face so prim you could see the fear beneath it like mold under paint. He shouted something about "in the name of the Crown." All I heard was "blah blah." I kicked the saber away, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him close.

"The crown isn't here," I said. "Only me."

He almost spat in my face because he thought that was courage. Courage is often just saliva. "You are animals," he gasped.

I grinned. "Yes," I said. "And you're food."

I pushed him away, not even to kill him. Just to get him out of the way. Another of my men finished the job, as if it were a duty. That was it. A life like a knot: tight for a moment, then untied.

They surrendered faster than I expected. Not because we were so great. Because they aren't built to fight. Merchant ships are built to carry, not to battle. Their men are built to count, not to die.

"Where's the cargo?" one of my boys yelled, and there it was again, that ugly tone. Not the tone of victory. The tone of possession.

A sailor pointed downwards, trembling. "In my stomach," he stammered.

In the stomach. Exactly. Everything is in the stomach. The stomach eats. The stomach hides. The stomach stinks.

We went below deck. It was darker, warmer, and the smell was immediately different. Wood, dampness, fear. And then: metal. Not the dull iron of nails. The other metal. The cold, clean one. You don't actually smell gold, but your mind pretends to, and that's enough.

There were boxes, sealed, stamped, pristine. I kicked one. It sounded heavy. Music for idiots.

One of them pulled out a crowbar, positioned it, cracked the wood, and when the lid popped open, it was as if someone had cut open the crew's brains and blown into them.

Gold.

Not just coins. Bars. Jewelry. Any sort of stuff that had surely once hung around someone's neck before ending up here in the hold of a ship. It glittered in the pale light like something indecent.

And instantly, men became animals, but not powerful animals. Ugly ones.

One laughed too loudly. One whispered "Shit." One reached out, as if he had to touch it to believe it was real. And that's exactly where it starts: You touch it, and suddenly you belong to it. Not the other way around.

"Shares!" someone shouted. Of course. Shares immediately. Not "we made it." Not "we're alive." Shares. As if this were some damn business.

Briggs came down, saw the gold, and his face barely changed. It was almost impressive. Or sick. Probably both. He just said, "Everything up. Under guard. Nobody's pocketing anything."

A few eyes twitched. You could see the sentences racing through their minds: Just a coin. Just a ring. Just a small piece. Nobody will notice. And that's exactly where it gets ugly. Not in the big theft. In the small one. In the "just for a minute."

Tom stood there, his hands covered in blood, grinning crookedly. "If you want to control it, you'll have to cut open everyone's pockets," he said.

"If necessary," Briggs said.

That wasn't a joke. Briggs meant it. And the men heard it. Some swallowed hard. Others became defiant. Defiantness is also ugliness.

We hauled the crates upstairs. The deck became a market, only without the traders. Gold clinked. Men stared. Some actually licked their lips. As if the gold were food.

The captain stood at the edge, crucified himself, and murmured again. "Temptation," he said softly.

Tom shouted: "Temptation is just another word for reward, you praying sack!"

Laughter, but it sounded sharp. Laughter can be warm. This was cold. Cold laughter says: I'm ready to hate you if you get in my way.

And then it happened. Of course. It always happens.

A coin fell from the edge of a box. Perhaps intentionally, perhaps not. It rolled across the planks, glinting, clinking, making that little sound that drives men wild. Two hands shot out at it simultaneously. Two men, one thought.

Their fingers met. First just a grasp. Then a pull. Then a push.

"Leave it!" said one of them.

"Mine!" said the other.

"That belongs to the ship!" someone shouted.

"The ship, yes," said another, "but I am the ship!"

That was the sentence. The sentence that reveals everything. I am the ship. No. You're just a sack of meat, forgetting that wood is supporting you.

Briggs was there immediately. He stepped between them, grabbed the coin from the deck, and lifted it up as if it were an example. "This," he said, "is a coin."

Nobody laughed.

"And that," said Briggs, and he slapped one of the men in the face with his open hand, "is stupidity."

The man staggered. Briggs punched the other man too. Not immediately. Not brutally. Just clearly. "And that too."

Then he threw the coin back into the box. "He who steals, dies," Briggs said. Simple. Without pathos. As if it were a weather report.

A few men nodded quickly, as if they'd always seen it that way. Others stared, and in their eyes lay that ugly film: hatred for Briggs, because Briggs was doing exactly what everyone knew was necessary. People hate necessity when it steals their greed.

I looked at Tom. Tom grinned, but his grin was thin. "Now it's going to get fun," he muttered.

"Funny," I repeated. "Like a knife in the back."

And while the gold lay there glittering, I realized: Keene may have been tied down below, but his spirit was standing in the middle of the deck, rubbing his hands and smelling the sweat.

Gold makes men ugly.

And we had only just heard the first coin.

The gold lay there like an open mouth. It said nothing, and yet it spoke louder than any captain. Men peered into it, and I could see something shift in their minds. Not from "we" to "I." That had already happened. More like from "living" to "possessing." Possession is the stupidest religion in the world because it convinces you that things make you less mortal.

Briggs immediately ordered the crates secured. Two men at each one, ready to fire, as if the crates were living enemies. Perhaps they were. An enemy that doesn't slit your throat, but your spine.

"Everyone back on board," Briggs ordered. "No detours. No bags. No grinning. Anyone who grins has already stolen."

A few men looked startled, as if grinning had suddenly become a crime. But they stopped. You see how quickly people can change their faces when they realize the hammer is within reach again.

Tom stood by a box, holding his hand over it as if it were an animal that might run away. "I'd say we drink to it," he said, "but I have a feeling Briggs would use our heads as cups."

"Briggs doesn't drink," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "He drinks control. And he'll never get full from it."

The captain was still standing at the side, muttering something about temptation. He sounded like a man who wanted to be moral but didn't have the guts to follow through. Morality on board is always just an excuse to feel superior to the next bastard. And today, everyone was a bastard.

We cast off. We left the merchant ships behind like two wounded animals, about to learn that the world isn't fair. One of them was burning at the side. Not a big fire, more of an ugly smoldering ember. I saw men jumping into the water from there because, at that moment, water sounded better than our deck. That's the truth: sometimes drowning is the more polite option.

As the sails filled again, I heard it everywhere: whispering. No longer about Keene. About gold. About how much. About when. About who gets what. Every man suddenly became an accountant, and no one could count properly.

"Briggs is going to cheat us," one of them hissed as I walked by.

I stopped. Not because I was looking for a fight. Because I wanted to hear how dirty it already was. "Why?" I asked.

The man flinched, realizing too late that he had thought aloud. "He... he decides everything," he muttered.

"Yes," I said. "And he kept you alive today."

"We got it," the man spat. "Not Briggs."

"Briggs didn't shoot you," I said. "That counts as leadership here."

He stared at me, and I saw in his eyes the hatred that gold breeds. Not hatred because I had done something to him. Hatred because I stood in his way, between him and a glittering dream.

"You're just a man too," he said.

"Yes," I said. "And that's exactly why I know how quickly you can become ugly."

He left, but his sweat remained. That cold, sticky sweat that says: I'm already calculating.

Tom came over to me. "They're already sharing," he said quietly.

"They don't even have it in their pocket," I said.

Tom shrugged. "Heads have pockets, too."

We went down to Keene's, not together, but close enough that it looked like a plan. Briggs didn't want Keene to realize how much the gold was working. But Keene saw everything. Keene can hear the air.

He sat downstairs, bound and guarded, and when he saw me, he grinned as if I had just brought him a present. "Ah," he said, "now you look beautiful."

"You mean ugly," I said.

Keene chuckled softly. "Only truth without light is ugly," he whispered. "And gold is good light. It shows every wrinkle."

"You will not be released," I said.

Keene blinked slowly. "You've said that before," he said. "And yet you keep talking to me. Why? Because you're afraid of yourselves. Not of me."

I would have liked to sew his mouth shut. Instead, I said, "Harker is gone. Now there's gold. Do you think that makes you stronger?"

Keene grinned wider. "It makes me redundant," he said. "And that's the best part. You no longer need me as an enemy. You'll be enough for each other."

I stared at him, and I felt that sentence lodge in my mind like a splinter. Keene was right, and I hated him for it. I went back upstairs because I didn't want my face to show him how much it hurt.

The wind was fresher on deck now, and yet the stench was worse. Not of smoke. Of people. Of that greasy, sweet smell of greed. Men walked past the crates as if they were at an altar. Some made the sign of the cross. Some spat. Some looked as if they were already considering whom they would have to slit open in the night to get a bit more.

Briggs called the crew together. No theatrics. Just a line, just glances, just that harsh tone: "Gold won't be handed out until we're safe," he said. "If we celebrate now, we'll die tomorrow. He who steals dies today."

A few heads nodded. A few eyes rolled. One whispered: "We're never truly safe."

Briggs heard it. Briggs hears everything that matters. "Exactly," he said. "That's why it's not being distributed."

That added fuel to the fire. Not because it was wrong. Because it reminded men that they control nothing. And as soon as men see something they don't control, they try to destroy or possess it. Today they wanted to possess it. Tomorrow, perhaps, to destroy it.

"And how much does everyone get?" someone shouted.

Briggs looked at the man. "Enough," said Briggs.

"Enough is not a number word," shouted another.

A few laughed, nervously. Dark humor was trying again to save the day. But this time the laughter sounded like a knife sharpening on stone.

Briggs stepped forward. "Anyone who wants to make money should get an office," he said. "Here, there are only rules."

"Rules change," muttered the old man with the rotten teeth, even though he was tied up and should have kept his mouth shut.

Tom took a step towards him. "Do you want me to realign your teeth, you old joker?" Tom asked.

The old man grinned crookedly, but the sweat on his forehead glistened. He wasn't finished. Nobody was finished.

Briggs let them go their separate ways, back to work. Work to avoid thinking. But gold turns thinking into a tingling sensation you can't scrub away. It stays.

That evening we saw a sail on the horizon, then another. Not merchant ships. Not fishing vessels. Too orderly. Too proud. Warships. Or at least something along those lines.

"The Crown," someone said, and there was suddenly a mixture of fear and excitement in their voice. Fear, because warships have cannons and rules. Excitement, because some men believe that more danger means more plunder. Stupidity knows no bounds.

Briggs ordered a change of course. Quickly. Quietly. No lanterns. No rum. The ship became an engine again. And yet: In the men's eyes, it was gold, even if it lay under tarpaulins. Gold even makes the night bright.

In the darkness I heard footsteps, faint, too faint. I turned and saw the boy, who always wanted to prove how strong he was, standing near the crates. He was pretending to be just on guard duty. But his hand was too close to the tarp.

"If you do it, you'll die," I said quietly.

He flinched, looked at me, his eyes wide. "I... I just wanted to..."

"Just for a moment," I said.

He swallowed. "Briggs never shares fairly," he whispered.

"There's no such thing as fair," I said. "Only alive."

He stared at me, and in his gaze was this ugly moment: he was on the verge of hating me for stealing his imagination. Then he saw my beard, my name in his mind, and he lowered his eyes. "I don't want to die," he murmured.

"Then keep your hands off," I said.

He left. Slowly. And I knew: This isn't a solution. This is just a postponement. Gold works at night. Gold whispers. Gold transforms "I want to live" into "I want more."

I stood alone by the crates, listening to the sea, listening to the wood, maybe hearing Keene laughing softly somewhere below, though no one would admit it. And I understood: The gold wasn't our loot now. It was our next problem. A problem that glitters, so you'll want to touch it.

Gold makes men ugly.

And we weren't even finished hating and loving it yet.

My laughter sounded like a judgment.

In the night, when gold lies under tarpaulins and warships play on the horizon, you quickly learn what's really at work inside you. Not courage. Not honor. But that small, shabby mechanism that says: If you give in now, everything will devour you. The sea, the crown, your own people. And sometimes, your own damned heart devours you first, because it thinks it has a right to rest.

I stood by the crates like a dog with a bone it doesn't want to eat because it knows it will give it a stomachache. The wind was thin, the sky black, and somewhere out there sails sliced through the darkness. The crown wasn't close enough for you to count its lights, but close enough to feel its weight on the back of your neck. The kind of closeness that keeps you awake at night, even when you're telling yourself you're tired.

Behind me, men were whispering. Quietly, but not quietly enough. Whispering is the sound of people who think they're clever while they're in the process of killing themselves.

"He never shares fairly," I heard again. Briggs. Always Briggs. As if fairness were a damned law of nature and not a fairy tale told to children to keep them from biting.

Tom came by, paused briefly, and looked at me. "You're guarding metal now," he murmured. "You've officially been promoted to treasurer."

"I don't guard metal," I said. "I guard idiots."

Tom grinned crookedly. "That's a full-time position."

He continued walking. Tom was calm, but his calmness was razor-sharp. I could see him mentally making lists: Who would grab first, who would howl first, who would stab first. Tom likes lists because lists are order. And order is the only thing that keeps him from just indiscriminately slaughtering everything that gets on his nerves.

Briggs was at the helm. Briggs spoke little, but his back spoke for him. That back said: I am the direction. And yet, everywhere there was a whiff of resistance. Not loud. Not like mutiny in broad daylight. More like mold: silent, persistent, everywhere.

A man came too close to the crates. Not the boy this time. Another one. Someone with the look of someone who'd already made up his mind, but was still pretending it was just a coincidence. He strolled as if he were simply standing guard. His hands hung loosely, but his fingers were alert. Fingers always betray you.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He flinched, then played it. "Nothing," he said. "Just... just to see if everything is properly secured."

"Nothing is certain," I said.

He tried to grin. "You sound like Briggs."

"Briggs sounds like a grave," I said. "I sound like someone who wants to let you breathe."

His grin narrowed. "You're only human," he said again, as if it were a magic spell.

"Yes," I said. "And that's exactly why I know how cheap you become when it shines."

He swallowed, glanced briefly at the tarpaulin as if the gold were calling him. Then he looked back at me, and there was defiance in his gaze. Defiant is ugly. Defiant is the beginning of "I'll show you." And "I'll show you" at sea usually ends with a body going overboard.

"We're risking everything," he said quietly. "For what? So that in the end Briggs will say: enough."

I shrugged. "We risk everything every day. Today you just have a pretty word for it."

He narrowed his eyes. "If we don't distribute it, we're dead."

"If we distribute it, we're dead too," I said.

He gave a short, dry laugh. "You're not laughing at all," he said. "You're just talking."

I stared at him. "Do you want to hear me laugh?" I asked.

He remained silent. And in that silence, I realized how much I truly missed my laughter. Before, when I was less of a name and more of a hungrier, I used to laugh. Not joyfully. More like a dog growls when it realizes it still has teeth. An ugly, short sound. But it was there.

Now my laughter had become rare. And when it did come, it was dangerous because it no longer sounded like fun. It sounded like a decision. Like judgment. Exactly what Briggs had warned me about. Names are weapons. And laughter is sometimes the trigger.

The man in front of me said, "Keene is right."

There it was. Direct. Unvarnished. No more detours.

I felt my stomach tighten briefly. Not with fear. With the reflex to rip his tongue out before he blew any more Keene into the air. But I didn't. I stayed calm. Sometimes, staying calm is the most brutal approach.

"Keene is tied up," I said.

"Keene is free-spirited," he said. "Like us."

"You are not free," I said. "You are greedy."

He took a half step closer. "And you?" he asked. "You act like you're better than me. But you're standing here like a deer in headlights. Do you think I can't see that?"

I noticed other men approaching. Not openly. Just enough to hear. So they could later recount what it was like when things went wrong. People love stories where they themselves bear no responsibility. They stand on the sidelines, gathering material.

The man said even more quietly: "Tell us how much you want."

I almost grinned. Not because it was funny. Because it was so damn typical. Not: How much are we getting? But: How much do you want? He'd already decided that I was the negotiator. That my name was the market.

I breathed in slowly. Salt. Wood. Greed. And then it happened: I laughed.

It came out like smoke. Short, dark, without warmth. No "haha." More like a sound telling you: Now you've gone too far, buddy.

And I immediately heard how the surroundings changed. How a few men unconsciously hunched their shoulders. How one held his breath. How the man in front of me blinked because he suddenly didn't know whether he had just won or lost.

My laughter didn't sound like fun.

It sounded like a verdict.

"You want numbers," I said calmly after the laughter had subsided. "You want shares. You want everything to look fair so you can sleep better at night."

He stared at me. "So?" he said, a little too defiantly.

"And this is not a place to sleep," I said. "This is a ship. And a ship is only your friend as long as you don't start eating it."

He spat, but his saliva was thin. "Briggs is eating us," he said.

"Briggs eats your crap," I said. "So you don't drown in your own filth."

He was about to say something, but then we heard it: a shout from the front. A short "Lights!" and then another. "Sails!"

The crown was closer. Or another ship. In the dark, all enemies look the same until they meet you.

Briggs shouted orders, suddenly loud, suddenly sharp. The ship became an engine again. Men ran. Ropes were pulled. Lanterns were covered. No rum, no idle chatter. Only heartbeats.

The man in front of me glanced briefly at the darkness, then back at the tarpaulin covering the gold, and I saw: he was calculating. He wasn't just calculating for danger. He was calculating for opportunity. Chaos is opportunity for thieves. Fear is opportunity for traitors.

"When things get rough," he said quietly, "everyone takes what they can."

That was the real sentence. Not Keene. Not Briggs. Not fairness. That sentence.

I looked at him and laughed again. Even shorter. Even colder. And I noticed how it even resonated within me, as if I myself were surprised at how little humanity was in that sound.

"If it goes off," I said, "you'll be the first one to fall."

He froze. Not because he thought I was a hero. But because he suddenly understood: I mean it. And that's the problem with laughter being like a judgment. When you laugh like that, people believe things you might not even have decided yet. They think you're already a judge, even if you only see yourself as a survivor.

He took a step back. Not much. But enough.

The men on the sidelines also retreated slightly, as if they'd realized they were standing too close to something that was no longer a joke. That was the poison: My laughter had restored order. Brief. Dirty. Effective.

Briggs called again, and the ship turned. The wind caught up. The sails filled. We glided into the darkness like a thief who suddenly realizes someone else is stealing from him.

Tom appeared next to me. "What was that?" he murmured.

"A misunderstanding," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "No. That was leadership."

I spat. "Leadership is just another word for guilt."

Tom looked ahead, where Briggs was standing. "Tell that to Briggs," he said.

"Briggs knows the word," I said. "He just sleeps on it."

The woman briefly passed by, looked at me, saw the man who was now keeping his distance. "You were laughing," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"It worked," she said.

"That doesn't make it any better," I said.

She nodded once. "Beauty is for the countryside," she said. "Here, only what works counts."

And there it was again: that pressure in my chest. My name, my beard, my laugh. Everything became a tool. Everything became something others wanted to use or had to fear.

The crown remained on the horizon, a dark thought that wouldn't go away. The gold lay under tarpaulins like a sleeping demon. Keene sat below and didn't even need to laugh, because the ship did it for him.

I stood by the crates again, and I knew: if I continued to laugh like that, my laughter would one day no longer be just a warning. It would become an order. It would become judgment on men who were my comrades just yesterday.

And that's the moment you realize: gold makes men ugly, yes.

But power turns them into something that no longer looks like a human being.

At night, when the ship cuts through the darkness and every shadow looks like an enemy, every sound grows louder. A cough sounds like a cannon. A knot that gives way sounds like betrayal. And a laugh—my laugh—hangs in the air like a bell you can't get back into the tower.

I noticed that men looked at me differently. Not all of them, not openly, but enough of them. Before, I was the guy with the beard, sometimes in the front, sometimes in the back, sometimes somewhere in between, and who ultimately did what needed to be done. Now I was the one who laughed when someone talked about "taking it when it hurts." I was the one who had belittled someone in a single sentence without touching them. And that's dangerous because it works faster than fists. Fists need physical contact. Words only need air.

Briggs knew. Of course. Briggs senses power like other people sense wind. He didn't come to me immediately. He let it sink in first. Briggs lets things sink in until they're either useful or he crushes them.

He approached me later, when the watches were changing and the deck was briefly emptier. His face was as always: no drama, no emotion, just that quiet hardness that tires you out if you run up against it long enough.

"You laughed," said Briggs.

"Yes," I said.

"In front of the men," Briggs said.

"Yes," I said again.

Briggs paused. Pauses are his cannons. "Why?" he asked.

I exhaled. "Because they become ugly," I said.

Briggs nodded slightly, as if he had expected exactly that answer. "And you?" he asked.

That hit home because it was too direct. "Me?" I said.

"You laugh like a judgment," said Briggs. "Judgments make you great. Great men capsize ships."

"You already said that," I said.

"Because you still don't hear it," Briggs said.

I felt anger rising, but I swallowed it down. Anger is Keene's language. And I didn't feel like giving Keene any more words today. "What do you want?" I asked.

Briggs glanced briefly towards the bow, where a few men stood pretending to be oblivious. Of course they saw everything. Ships are small. Secrets are a joke here.

"I want you to become less," Briggs said.

I didn't laugh. I almost did, but I held it back. "Less?" I asked.

"Less name," said Briggs. "More human."

"Being human will kill you," I said.

"Being named too," said Briggs.

There was that coldness again. Not malicious. Just clear. Briggs is like a knife that doesn't hate what it cuts.

"Keene is sitting downstairs laughing his head off," I said.

Briggs' eyes narrowed slightly. "Keene is down there," Briggs said. "And yet he moves things. Because you let him move them."

"The men are greedy," I said.

"Men are men," said Briggs. "Greed is normal. Discipline is rare. And discipline is the only thing that keeps us going today."

"And what about the gold?" I asked.

Briggs looked at me as if it were a stupid question. "Gold is a burden," he said. "Not a reward. It drags us down. It makes us visible. It slows us down."

"And yet you risk everything for it," I said.

Briggs shrugged. "Sometimes you have to carry burdens so that you can be light again later."

I almost told him that sounded like a sermon. But Briggs doesn't preach. Briggs calculates. And his calculations are usually correct. That's what makes him so hard to hate, even though you want to.

"If things go wrong again," Briggs said quietly, "I won't need you as a judge. I'll need you as a hand."

"You have Tom," I said.

Briggs' gaze flickered briefly to Tom, who was leaning against the mast like a piece of night. "Tom is knife," Briggs said. "Knives cut. Hands hold. You hold."

There it was again. Holding. Like with Keene. Like with the mutiny. Like with the crates. My talent wasn't killing, not talking. My talent was holding. And holding makes you responsible, whether you like it or not.

Briggs left without saying another word. He left me alone with that sentence, because Briggs knows: sentences work better at night than punches.

Later I met Tom on the aft deck. He was alone, looking out at the water as if checking if it was hungry tonight. Tom rarely talks about anything voluntarily, but today he was in that state where even he sensed things could go wrong.

"Briggs has spoken to you," said Tom.

"Yes," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "So? Did he tell you again that you're getting too big?"

"Yes," I said.

Tom gave a short, dry laugh. "He's afraid of you," Tom said.

"No," I said. "He's afraid of what men see in me."

Tom nodded. "That's almost the same."

We were silent for a moment, listened to the ship, listened to the wind. Then Tom said: "That guy from earlier... the one with the bags."

"Yes?" I asked.

"He talked to two others later," said Tom. "Quietly. And he kept looking at the boxes."

"Of course," I said.

Tom spat. "I can make him disappear tonight."

That was Tom. A problem? Cut it off. Gone. Done. Tom embodies the simplest kind of moral: if it's dangerous, it dies.

I looked at him. "And then?" I asked.

Tom shrugged. "Then it smells less."

"Then it will smell different," I said.

Tom narrowed his eyes. "You're going soft."

"No," I said. "I'm getting smarter."

Tom laughed softly. "Clever is soft with long words."

"And a knife is stupid with a short end," I said.

He stared at me, and I realized: This was a dangerous conversation. Not because of us. Because we were in that area where you start testing each other. And tests at sea often end with someone failing and falling overboard.

The woman approached, as always without a sound. She had a cloth in her hand and wiped her fingers, even though she didn't look dirty. Perhaps this is her ritual: cleaning her hands so she doesn't forget that dirt isn't normal. Or at least so she can keep it in check.

"You laughed," she said to me, as if that were the title of the night.

"Yes," I said.

"The men heard it," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She nodded. "And now they're waiting for you again."

Tom growled. "Let them wait. He who waits, starves."

"Those who wait, plan," she said.

Tom wanted to disagree, but he knew she was right. Planning is intentional waiting.

I looked towards the crates. Two guards stood there, but the guards themselves were men. Men with greed. Men with dreams. Men with bags.

"Briggs doesn't want to distribute," the woman said.

"Yes," I said.

"And the men won't swallow that," she said.

"Then they have to learn it," said Tom.

The woman looked at Tom. "Learning costs blood," she said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Blood costs nothing. It's everywhere."

She looked at me again. "Your laughter saved blood yesterday," she said.

"Maybe," I said.

"It won't save money every time," she said.

That was the point. You can't laugh every time someone judges and hope the world will fall into place. Eventually, you'll laugh, and someone will laugh back. And then things will get loud. Loud as cannons. Loud as screams. Loud as the body when it realizes words are no longer enough.

During the night, the warships—or whatever they were—became more visible again. Two dark shapes, moving slowly as if searching for us. Not directly toward us, but in a pattern that said: I know you. I am patient.

Briggs turned off the lights. Completely. The ship became a shadow within a shadow. And in that darkness, the gold almost became a light of its own, even though no one saw it. You feel it nonetheless. You feel how men in the darkness think of chests, like a woman they can't have. Longing is also greed.

I went back to the boxes. The man from before wasn't there, but I saw his look in the eyes of others. You know it. That kind of look that no longer asks if something is right, but only if it's possible.

"Guard," I said quietly to one of the men there.

He nodded too quickly. Too eagerly. Eagerness is dangerous.

"You're nervous," I said.

"No," he said. "Just awake."

"Being awake is good," I said.

He grinned briefly, and in that grin lay the ugly truth. "Awake also means... ready," he whispered.

I looked at him. "Ready for what?"

He swallowed. "For... when the time comes."

There it was again. When the time comes. Not: when Briggs gives the command. Not: when the crown fires. But: when the time comes. A self-created moment. A moment men give themselves because they have no patience and their greed knows no bounds.

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch. Laughter wanted to escape. Judgment. Control. But I held it back. Briggs was right. Laughter like judgment makes you great. And greatness capsizes ships.

So I just said, "When the time comes, those who are closest will die first."

The man turned pale. Not out of fear of death. Out of fear that he had just been recognized.

I left without making any further threats. Threats are cheap. It's certainty that's expensive.

And as I walked across the deck, I heard Keene's quiet laughter somewhere down in the darkness, which may not have been real, but became so loud in my head that I almost stopped.

My laughter sounded like a judgment.

And I knew: Keene was waiting for me to laugh again. Not because he was afraid of it. But because he knew that every judgment eventually needs an executioner.

Just before dawn, a ship is at its most honest. Not because it suddenly becomes poetic, but because everyone is too tired to put on an act. That's the hour when you see who's truly awake and who's just pretending. And it's the hour when greed strikes, because it knows: tiredness is an open window.

I stood by the crates again. This was slowly becoming my new damned home: wood underfoot, a tarpaulin in front of my eyes, and behind it that cold glitter you can't see but still feel. The guards changed. One yawned. One rubbed his eyes. One was too quiet. Too quiet means: he's not just listening to his surroundings. He's listening to himself.

The man who had spoken yesterday about "when things go wrong" came back. Not directly. He came by roundabout means, as if he were just strolling by. Two others came with him. They kept their distance from each other, but not too much. Distance is camouflage, but it's also communication. I saw it immediately: the three of them were one.

I didn't move. I waited. Sometimes waiting is the only thing that keeps you from walking into a trap.

They stopped a few steps away. The leader—the one with the poison in his mouth—raised his hands slightly, as if offering peace. "We don't want any trouble," he said quietly.

"Trouble doesn't come because you want it," I said. "It comes because you're stupid."

One of the others grinned nervously. "You talk like a preacher," he muttered.

"Preachers lie," I said. "I don't."

The leader swallowed hard. His eyes slid to the tarpaulin. He couldn't help himself. The gold pulled at him like a hook in his flesh.

"We just thought..." he began.

"Don't think," I said. "Work."

He grimaced. "You're not Briggs," he said.

"No," I said. "I am the one standing here now."

"That's precisely why," he said, and now there was that tone I already knew: respect that sounded like a threat. "That's precisely why we want to talk."

"Talking is for night," I said, and I heard myself parroting Briggs, and it tasted bitter.

The leader smiled thinly. "It's nighttime," he said.

He was right. And that was the problem: he took the rule and made it his own. Keene had taught them that. Rules are only weapons if you can twist them.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He exhaled as if relieved that we were finally getting to the heart of the matter. "We want the gold to be distributed," he said.

"Briggs said no," I said.

"Briggs says a lot," the man said. "And you... you are not Briggs. You laughed. You understand us."

There was my laughter again, like a stain on the deck. I would have loved to scrub it away.

"I understand you," I said. "That's exactly why I'm saying no."

His eyes hardened. "You're turning against the team."

"I stand against stupidity," I said.

One of the others took a step closer. "We were there when we hauled those crates up," he said. "We were bleeding. And now we're supposed to wait until Briggs decides whether we're even alive?"

"You're alive," I said. "That's more than many get."

The leader grinned crookedly. "We live like dogs," he said. "And you hold the leash."

"I'm not holding anything," I said. "I'm just standing between you and the knife you're putting to yourselves."

He laughed softly. And this laugh was different from mine. It wasn't judgment. It was defiance. "You think you're the judge," he said. "But you're just a beard."

The word was meant to make me feel small. Beard. Not name. Not person. Beard. A thing you can touch if you're brave enough.

I felt something tighten inside me. Not anger. More like a cold clarity. That kind of clarity you have when you've already decided not to budge.

"If I'm just a beard," I said, "then you can just walk past me."

He hesitated. For a heartbeat. And in that very heartbeat, I saw: He wanted it. He really wanted it. He wanted to test whether my laughter was just air or if there were teeth behind it.

He took the step.

Not fast. Testing. Like a man who thinks he has the majority on his side.

I didn't laugh. I hit.

Not violent. Not like Tom. Simple. A quick tap with the heel of the hand against his throat. Not so hard that he dies. Not so hard that he can't breathe. Not so hard that he immediately understands how precious air is.

He gasped, dropped to his knees, and put his hands to his throat. The other two froze.

"I didn't want any trouble," he choked.

"Trouble wanted you," I said.

One of the others instinctively pulled out a knife. Not to kill me. Just to feel big. Feeling big is important when you're watching your leader on his knees.

I took a step to the side so he could really see me in the dim light. "If you pull this," I said calmly, "you're dead. Not later. Not by Briggs. Now."

The man trembled. The knife remained in his hand, but suddenly it was no longer a weapon. It was proof that he was stupid.

Then I heard footsteps. Lots of them. Fast. And I knew: The conversation wasn't private. It was a rehearsal. And now the audience was coming.

Tom emerged from the darkness as if he had been made of it. Behind him were two more, more loyal men. Tom saw the leader on the ground, saw the knife, saw me. He wasn't grinning. He was simply ready.

"What is it?" asked Tom.

"Numbers," I said.

Tom spat. "I hate math."

The woman was there too, a few steps behind Tom, calm, her eyes cold. She saw the tarpaulin, saw the men, saw the sweat. She simply said, "It's time."

The leader gasped, then looked up at me. There was no longer defiance in his gaze. It was hatred. Pure hatred. The hatred of a man who had just lost his own little revolution. Such men don't forget. Such men wait. Keene knew this. Keene had planned it.

"You touched him," said Tom, almost amused.

"He tested me," I said.

Tom nodded. "Then he's wiser now."

"No," the woman said. "He's just angrier now."

That was worse. You can steer cleverly. Anger only seeks a throat.

I bent down to the leader and said quietly, "Go to sleep. If you're still alive tomorrow."

He spat blood and saliva onto the planks. "You're no better than Briggs," he gasped.

"No," I said. "I'm just faster."

Tom laughed briefly. A single sound. Black. Dirty. And in that laughter, I heard something I didn't like: agreement. Tom liked it when things were clear. Tom liked it when violence decided, because words bored him.

The other men, who had by now come closer, stood there and stared. Some looked shocked. Some looked relieved. Some looked hungry, because they had just realized: My laughter isn't my only weapon. My hand is too.

And then, at that moment, I understood what Briggs meant. If you are a judge, you must also be an executioner. Otherwise, someone else will laugh at you as the judge.

"Take them away," I said to Tom.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Where to?"

"Get away from the boxes," I said.

Tom grabbed the knife and twisted the man's arm behind his back as if it were routine. The man groaned, but dropped the knife. The leader was hauled up, still gasping for breath. He cursed, whispered, swore. Each oath was a new knife, only without the steel.

The woman paused briefly with me after the others had left. "You didn't laugh," she said.

"No," I said.

"Good," she said. "Your laugh would have been too big today."

"Instead, I struck," I said.

She nodded. "It was smaller," she said. "And yet it worked."

I looked at the tarp. At the night. At the horizon, where the crown might still be breathing somewhere. And I felt my hands were still, but my head wasn't.

Because I knew: That wasn't a solution. That was just another stone you throw into the water so you can briefly forget how deep it is.

My laughter sounded like a judgment.

And tonight it had been my hand.

Tomorrow it could be a knife.

Death was always with him.

Death was never one to make a grand entrance. No drumroll, no flash of lightning, no "here I am." He simply rides along. Like a silent passenger who doesn't register, doesn't pay, doesn't eat—and yet always has the best seat. Right behind your ribs.

Ever since the gold had been on board, the ship smelled different. Not of wealth. Of illness. Of that sweet fever men get when they believe life owes them something. And in that fever, death becomes comfortable. It sits down, puts its feet up, and waits until one of us trips over itself.

The Crown was still out there somewhere, like a shark that didn't necessarily want you, but smelled blood and became curious. Briggs let us walk in the dark, without lanterns, without noise, as if we were suddenly honest people with nothing to hide. That was the joke: the dirtier you are, the quieter you sometimes have to become to survive.

The men were tired, but their eyes were awake. Not awake because of danger. Awake because of gold. That's the worst kind of awakening. Danger makes you sharp. Gold makes you greedy. Greed is a knife without a handle, and eventually you'll be holding it by the wrong end.

I went on my rounds again, not because I enjoy being the damned watchman, but because nobody else does without already thinking about stealing themselves. The crates were under tarpaulins, guarded, yes. But you can't cover your thoughts with a tarpaulin. The men saw the gold everywhere. In the clinking of chains. In the glint of saltwater on planks. Even in the stars, because stars twinkle just as stupidly.

Tom was always nearby. Tom is like a shadow carrying knives. Sometimes I didn't hear him, but I felt him. And I knew: if things went wrong, he'd be the first to go wrong. Tom turns chaos into a line. A bloody line, but a line nonetheless.

Briggs said sometime late in the morning: "We're jettisoning ballast."

A few men immediately flinched, mistaking the word "ballast" for "gold." That's another ugly thing: as soon as gold is involved, every word sounds like theft.

"Ballast," Briggs repeated. "Not prey."

No one said anything, but I saw the looks. One of them was probably thinking: He calls the gold ballast so he can keep it for himself. People are like dogs in moments like these: they only hear what they want to hear.

Briggs had old barrels, broken crates, and superfluous items thrown overboard. Wood and trash that disappeared into the water like bad decisions. The ship became lighter, yes. But their heads grew heavier because they realized: We have to be faster. And faster means fewer mistakes. But greedy men make more mistakes. Because they believe they're in a hurry to get rich.

It happened in the afternoon. No cannon shot. No attack. Just a silly, little moment when the sea briefly raised its finger and said: I'm still here too.

A sailor—one of the younger ones, but old enough to know that "watch out" is no joke—slipped on the railing. Nothing dramatic. Just a step on something wet, a fall too late. He reached for a rope, missed, and suddenly there was this sound: a short gasp, as if the air was leaving him before his body could.

He tipped over the railing.

So fast.

One heartbeat, and he was gone.

Not run away like a rake on the beach. Not run away with a bag and a plan. Run away like a stone.

A few men shouted. Others cursed. One even laughed briefly, in shock, because his mind didn't know what else to do. Laughter as a reflex, just like coughing in smoke. And then there was silence, that awful silence where you wait to see if a head will reappear.

He didn't dive.

Tom was first at the railing, looked down, and his face was hard. "Too late," he said.

"He's only..." someone began.

Tom pointed into the water. "The sea takes you fast if you're rude to it," he said.

One of them wanted to throw a rope. Briggs' voice came like a blow: "No."

Everyone turned to him.

"No?" someone shouted, and there it was again, that poisonous glint: not just grief. Accusation. How could you say no?

Briggs stepped closer, looked into the water as if counting the man down there. "If we stop, we're dead," Briggs said. "If we maneuver, we're dead. If we make noise, we're dead. He's gone."

"He was one of us!" someone shouted.

"He was careless," said Briggs.

That was it. No speech. No ritual. Just a verdict, as cold as my laughter.

And I felt the men swallow it. Some swallowed it like medicine. Others like poison. And poison stays.

Death was always a passenger, but sometimes he briefly stepped out of the shadows and sat visibly on the railing, so that everyone could see him. So that everyone would remember: You are only guests here.

I stood there and felt something ugly inside me: relief. Not because the man was dead. Because it was a different topic than gold. For a moment, gold wasn't the focus. For a moment, it was the sea again. And the sea is fair in its own cruel way. It doesn't take because you want your share. It takes because you slip.

The team muttered, continued working, but now there was a new smell in the sweat: fear, once again linked to something real. Gold fear is abstract. Ocean fear is real. Real sometimes holds you together.

In the evening, as the sun went down, the crown sails came back into view. Not close, but close enough to make out the lines. Briggs didn't swear. Briggs rarely swears. He simply said, "They can smell us."

"Gold stinks far and wide," muttered Tom.

I looked at the boxes. Under tarpaulins. Silent. And yet so loud.

"They are faster than us," one of them said.

"Then we'll be wiser tonight," said Briggs.

He ordered a course change, small angles, so we would disappear into the darkness. And as the ship turned, I heard a noise below. Not loud, but wrong. Like someone knocking over something that shouldn't be knocked over.

I went downstairs quickly.

Two guards stood in front of Keene in the corridor below. One was holding his hand, and blood was dripping between his fingers. Not much. But enough. Blood is always enough to wake you up.

"What happened?" I asked.

The guard swallowed. "He... he talked," he said. "And I... I shouted at him. And then..."

Keene sat there, bound, and smiled. His smile was small, but it was the smile of a man who had just won without getting up.

"What did he do?" I asked.

The second guard muttered, "He bit."

I stared at Keene. "You bit him?"

Keene shrugged, as if it were a courtesy. "He put his hand too close to my mouth," Keene whispered. "I'm just being... honest."

The injured guard cursed, more out of pain than courage. Keene smiled slightly. "You see?" he said softly. "Death rides along. Sometimes in teeth. Sometimes in ropes. Sometimes in gold."

I would have liked to silence him. Not with words. With something permanent. But Briggs wanted him alive. And alive, Keene was a virus.

"Eventually you won't have any teeth left," I said.

Keene grinned. "Then I'll use words," he whispered.

I had the guards changed, had the wound bandaged. And when I went back upstairs, I realized: Death wasn't just out there in the water. It was also in here, in those small moments when men get nervous and get too close. Too close to edges, too close to knives, too close to mouths.

Night had returned above. Black. Still. The sky was full of stars, as if it were all just a pretty play.

Tom stood at the bow, looking at the crown sails. "We're losing time," he said.

"Time is losing us," I said.

He grinned crookedly. "Nice. Now you're getting poetic. Should I bite you too, so you go back to normal?"

I laughed briefly, but it wasn't a judgment this time. Just that dry sound that says: We're all screwed. And maybe that's the only comfort you really have at sea.

Behind us lay the water in which a man had vanished, without farewell, without a name, without anything. Before us lay the crown, which would gladly see us in chains. Beneath our feet lay gold that makes us ugly. And somewhere inside, Keene sat waiting for the next bite.

Death was always a passenger.

Not as an enemy you can beat.

Like a passenger who eventually says: Get out. Now.

And the worst part: He doesn't ask if you're ready.

The night tasted of metal, even though no one saw the gold. You still feel it, like a bad tooth that suddenly throbs when the wind shifts. The crown hung somewhere behind us, not like a lantern, more like a thought that won't go away. And thoughts are worse than cannons, because cannons eventually fall silent, but thoughts don't.

Briggs let us sail at an angle that looked like cowardice and smelled like cunning. He changed course in small jabs, as if he wanted to lie to the sea itself. No wide turns, no dramatic maneuvers. Just this constant, quiet: not there, not there, not there. The ship became a lie made of wood.

The men worked without speaking. That was new. Before, they always had some saying, some curse, some joke. Now there was only breath. And sweat. And the smell of fear trying not to smell like fear.

I walked past the mast where the burly man was still sitting, bound. His head was bowed, but I saw his eyes moving as if he were calculating in the darkness. Some men count stars. He was counting possibilities. Possibility is a dangerous word when you're locked in a box with thieves.

Tom was standing somewhere in the shadows again. I didn't hear him until he was suddenly next to me. "They're closer," he murmured.

"The crown?" I asked.

Tom nodded towards the stern. "Two lights, very low," he said. "They're keeping their distance, but they're there."

I looked, but in the dark everything is a trick. Still, you learn at sea to trust your gut. And my gut said: Yes. There's something there. There's someone who wants us.

"How long?" I asked.

Tom shrugged. "Until we kill ourselves," he said.

"Or until the sea finishes it off," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "At least the sea is honest."

That was the point. The Crown isn't honest. It pretends to be orderly, but it's just another pirate ship with better uniforms. It doesn't hang you out of morality, but because it wants to show it has the bigger stick.

Briggs shouted quiet orders, and the crew obeyed. No discussion. Not even the greedy bastards wanted to discuss it now, because they knew: if you argue, you stop rowing, and if you stop rowing, something will eat you.

Nevertheless, I noticed: The gold continued to work. It worked in the corners of my eyes, in the small spaces between men. Two guards stood by the crates, and I swear I saw one of them

lift the tarpaulin ever so slightly, just a finger's width, just to check if it was still there. As if gold could run away. As if it could sneak out of the crate and kiss him in his sleep.

I went over. Not quickly. Quickly makes you suspicious. Quickly says: I'm scared. I just stepped closer and said quietly: "If you pick it up again, you're dead."

The man froze. He dropped the tarpaulin like a child caught stealing. "I... I just wanted to..."

"You wanted possessions," I said. "Possessions are hard. And you are light."

He swallowed. His gaze flickered briefly to my beard, as if testing whether my name protected it or attacked it. Then he nodded, too quickly, too eagerly. Zeal is dangerous. Zeal is the trembling of a man who believes he still has a chance.

I left him standing there. If you break every petty thief immediately, you'll end up with nothing but broken men, and broken men do great things. Sometimes you have to let stupidity live until you have the right moment to kill it.

Later, in the middle of the night, there was a sound that didn't match the wind. A dull crack, like wood not just moving, but yielding. I turned and saw two men at the edge of the deck. One was holding a rope, the other was pulling on a block that shouldn't have been moved at all. And in that moment I knew: This isn't work. This is an attempt. An attempt to move a box. An attempt to make something disappear in the darkness.

"Hey!" I didn't shout loudly, but in a way that cut.

The two flinched like dogs caught in the act. One let go of the rope, the block creaked again.

Tom was there instantly, as if he'd been waiting for just such a night. "Ah," he said softly, almost kindly. "Now it's finally getting interesting."

"It's nothing," one stammered.

"Of course it's nothing," said Tom. "Nothing is always what thieves say right before they bleed."

Briggs arrived too, quickly, calmly, his gaze like a nail. He looked at the men, looked at the crates, looked at me. "What?" he asked.

"They wanted to make a difference," I said.

"Move what?" asked Briggs, even though he already knew.

One of the men – the dumber one – said it anyway: "Just one crate, Captain. Only... we wanted to secure it better."

Briggs nodded slowly. "Better secure it," he repeated.

Then he stepped forward and didn't punch the man in the face. He punched him in the stomach, hard, short, so that the man crumpled like a sack. No blood, but the air was gone. Air is the first thing you lose when you learn.

The second man tried to run away. Tom grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back as if he were a dog on a leash. "Where to?" Tom asked. "To the harbor?"

The man gasped and thrashed. "I... I..."

Briggs looked at him. "You want gold," said Briggs.

The man shook his head, and that's precisely what made it so ridiculous. "No," he choked.

Briggs nodded again. "Then you want to be dead," said Briggs.

Silence.

That was the worst part: he said it so calmly that it didn't even sound like a threat. More like a diagnosis. And you don't discuss diagnoses, you accept them.

"Tie them up," said Briggs.

Tom grinned crookedly. "With pleasure."

They were imprisoned, their hands tied, to the mast, next to the burly fellow who now watched like a man who realizes: the world has shrunk. Two new faces in the ranks of those who have learned that gold doesn't just glitter, it bites.

The team whispered again, quietly, viciously. Not with pity. More like: If those two tried it, why not me? And that's precisely why punishment is a double-edged sword. It deters. And it serves as a reminder.

Briggs went back to the helm as if it were all just a thread he'd snipped. I stood for a moment, watching the two bound men gasp for breath, their eyes darting back and forth as if searching for a way out. Ways out are rare on a ship. Most of the time, the only way out is water.

Tom leaned towards me. "Do you want me to throw one of them overboard?" he asked quietly. Tom asked it the way other people ask if you want sugar in your coffee.

"No," I said.

Tom raised an eyebrow. "You're getting soft."

"I'm getting smarter," I said.

"Smart is slow," said Tom. "Slow is dead."

"Death is also when you destroy the team until no one knows what it even stands for anymore," I said.

Tom laughed briefly. "What do we stand for? Rum, blood, and shit."

"And yet," I said, "you are standing."

He paused for a heartbeat. Then he spat and grinned again. "You talk like a man in charge," he said.

"This is the worst disease," I said.

The woman approached, saw the two bound men, saw Briggs, saw the darkness. "Death rides along," she said softly, as if repeating an old refrain.

"Yes," I said.

She nodded towards the stern, where the lights of the crown might be, or perhaps only starlight. "And today it has many faces," she said.

I heard a sound deep in the ship's hold. Not Keene's laughter. More like a soft singing, barely audible, like a man trying to talk himself to sleep. Maybe it was Keene. Maybe it was a guard. Maybe it was simply the ship telling you: You won't win forever.

Just before dawn, the wind picked up. That was good. Wind is honest. Wind forces you to make decisions without discussion. Briggs took advantage of it, let the sails hoist, and our ship leaped forward like an animal that finally smells blood. The lights at the stern dimmed. Perhaps only because the night was getting brighter. Perhaps because we had actually gained some distance. Perhaps because the crown had found another meal.

The men breathed a little again. Not freely. Just a little. And that's precisely when death is most dangerous: when you think you've momentarily shaken it off. That's when it settles in comfortably.

I looked at the water. A black expanse that absorbs everything. I thought of the man who went overboard yesterday. No goodbye. No prayer. Just a short gasp, then silence. And I thought: It happens so fast. You're history so quickly, before you even realize you were history.

Death was always a passenger.

Not as a big monster.

As a small, everyday thing stuck in a wet plank, in a loose knot, in a greedy hand, in a bound man who eventually finds a knife.

And as long as you forget that, he makes it easy for you.

The morning was gray, as if the sky had nothing left but weariness. The crown was no longer visible in the distance, but that only means it's currently out of sight. Sharks also disappear before they bite. And us? We were a piece of wood with gold in its belly, deluding ourselves into thinking we could outrun the water.

The men were exhausted. Not the pleasant exhaustion after a fight, where at least you know why you're breathing. It was that ugly exhaustion where you no longer know what you're even staying awake for. And it's precisely in this exhaustion that the mistakes death loves happen. Mistakes no one planned. Mistakes so banal they make you furious if you survive.

Briggs left the bound men hanging from the mast. Not to torture them. Briggs doesn't torture for fun. He tortures for educational purposes. He wanted everyone to see them. Two men who thought they could pocket a piece of their future. Two men who now consist of nothing but breath and shame.

The burly man sat beside them, silent. His face was blank except for this gray: I once wanted to be tall. Now I'm furniture. Furniture covered in sweat.

The team continued working, but more slowly. You could see how thoughts are heavier than ropes. The boy with the clean-cut jaw was still knotting like a machine, but his hands sometimes trembled, just for a moment, and he hid it immediately because he didn't want anyone to see it. Men hide tremors like children hide tears.

Late in the morning, a wind picked up, crosswind and strong. The ship heeled over, the wood creaked, the ropes sang. And then – as if the world were playing a joke – a rope snapped.

Not just any rope. An important one. One that holds a sail, that pulls straight, that provides just the bit of speed that separates us from the crown. The rope snapped like a scream, and the sail flapped like an angry rag.

Men jumped down, grabbed, pulled, and cursed. A rope that snaps is like a knife brandishing. It can kill you without hating you.

One of the men—the one who had been standing guard by the crates yesterday, the one with the overly eager look—ran too close. He wanted to show that he was useful. Usefulness was his attempt to excuse his greed. He reached for the whipping rope.

Too late.

The rope struck his head. Not like a gentle blow. Like a hammer made of rope. His body went weak for a moment, his legs buckled, and he fell backward. No cry. Just a dull thud. Then he lay there, his eyes open, but somewhere else.

Silence. A heartbeat.

Then someone shouted: “He is alive!”

I knelt down and looked at him. Blood on the back of his head, dark, flowing rapidly. He was breathing, but shallowly. That's the kind of breathing that doesn't reassure you. Breathing doesn't mean living. Breathing only means that death hasn't signed the contract yet.

The woman came quickly, knelt down, felt his pulse, and looked into his eyes. "He's gone," she said softly.

“Way?” someone asked.

She looked up. "His head is gone," she said. "His body is still working. But he... he's no longer here."

A few men muttered. One cursed. One made a gesture against evil. The captain prayed again, as if he had been waiting for something to finally happen that would make him feel important.

Briggs stood over us. He said nothing, but his gaze held the judgment: stupidity. Again. And I realized: death had revealed itself once more. Not with a cannon. With a piece of rope. So unspectacularly that it's almost insulting.

"Back to work," said Briggs.

A few men stared at him. One shouted: "He's bleeding!"

"Then tie it up," said Briggs. "And pull in the sail."

So simple. So cruel. So necessary.

We carried the injured man down, laid him in the ship's hold, where it's damp and warm, and where death sounds quieter. The woman bandaged him as best she could a head that's already half-fallen from life. I stood beside him and watched the blood seep through the cloths. Blood is honest. It tells you: No matter how much gold you have, you're just a sack of liquid.

Keene sat further back, bound, and I swear I saw him smile, even though he had nothing to do with the rope. Keene smiles at every death. Not because he loves blood. Because death creates movement. Movement creates opportunities.

"You're losing yourselves," Keene whispered as I walked past him.

"You'll run out of air eventually," I said.

Keene grinned. "Air is everywhere," he whispered. "Until it's gone."

I should have shut him up. But I kept walking. Sometimes walking away is the only way not to kill. And sometimes not killing is the hardest decision.

When we got back up, Briggs had already had the sail re-secured. The course was back. The engine was running again. But the price was a man who now lies below, perhaps never to see properly again. Perhaps never to speak properly again. Perhaps never to laugh again. And all because he wanted to show that he was useful. Usefulness can kill you. Just like greed. Just like fear. They're all just different blades.

In the afternoon, the mood soured again. Even further. The men weren't just tired now, they were superstitious. Superstition is tiredness mixed with imagination. One said the gold was cursed. Another said the man who had gone overboard was now pulling at our feet. One claimed he'd heard a voice in the wind at night that knew our names. Names are curses too, if you repeat them often enough.

The captain actually gave a short speech, a mix of prayer and self-justification. "The Lord is testing us," he said.

Tom shouted: "The Lord can test us!"

A few laughed, but the laughter was thin. Thin like the skin on a wound.

Briggs remained firm. He remained firm because he knew: if he softened now, everything would fall apart. And yet, I noticed how his gaze sometimes lingered on me longer. As if he were checking whether I was still a hand or already a judgment.

That evening, as the sky darkened again, I sat alone at the stern and gazed at the water. Behind us lay a strip that looked like a path. But it isn't a path. Water remembers nothing. Water is only movement. And that's precisely why it's the perfect grave.

I thought of all those who had already been swept along, unwillingly. The man who went overboard. The one lying below now, perhaps already half-dead, even though he's still breathing. The two thieves on the mast, who now know that gold binds harder than ropes. Harker on the beach, who might be sitting in a hut right now, thinking he's free, while somewhere a soldier smells his trail.

And Keene, sitting below, who keeps throwing words around like nails.

Death was always a passenger.

Not as a grand finale.

As a routine.

Like a bill that gets longer every day.

And I understood: You can't get rid of him. You can only keep him occupied. With wind. With work. With commands. With laughter. With blows. With everything that prevents you from becoming still and listening.

Because when you become still, you hear him.

And when you hear him, you know that at some point he'll say: Now.

No request.

Without saying goodbye.

The flag hung like a curse.

The flag is just fabric. A bit of thread, a bit of paint, a bit of symbolism for people who don't have the courage to look you straight in the eye. But at sea, fabric is sometimes heavier than iron. Fabric can save you if it's white and you surrender. Fabric can kill you if it's black and you say: Come on.

Ours hung up there like a damned verdict no one signed, but everyone had to pay the price for. Black, tattered at the edges, with a mark on it that promised more than any human could ever deliver. When the wind caught it, it sounded like it was laughing. Not warmly. More like Keene sitting down below, thinking: Go on, you idiots, destroy it yourselves.

Ever since the gold was in its belly, the flag had a new smell. Not of tar and salt, but of guilt. You can't prove it, but you can feel it. Some things change once enough men believe in them. And men like to believe in anything that allows them to blame their own stupidity on something else.

"The flag attracts them," someone murmured in the morning, when we were once again surrounded only by water and the crown remained somewhere invisible.

"What attracts them? Flies?" growled Tom.

The man swallowed. "The warships," he said more quietly, as if the word itself were a cannon.

Tom spat. "Warships are attracted to gold, you brilliant bastard. Gold and your greedy eyes."

The man glanced briefly at the tarpaulins covering the crates, and I saw in his eyes: he knew Tom was right. But it's easier to curse fabric than your own hand.

I stood at the mast and looked up. The flag hung half-limp because the wind had briefly died down. Sometimes a flag looks sad. Ours never looked sad. Ours looked like it was looking for trouble, even when it hung limp. That was the problem: even if we were just sailing, without shooting, without looting, without shouting, that flag was a threat. And threats are eventually answered. If not by the crown, then by the sea. Or by the men who can no longer sleep because they can hear the thing flapping in their heads.

Briggs came forward, his gaze first on the flag, then on me. He said nothing. Briggs rarely speaks about symbols. He's a man of wood and numbers. But I could see from his jaw that the subject bothered him. It bothers him because it's uncontrollable. You can trim a sail. You can load a cannon. But you can't trim what a flag triggers in a man.

Late in the morning, a sail came into view. Small at first, then larger. Not a warship. Not a merchant ship. More like a small boat, perhaps a fisherman's, perhaps a smuggler's, perhaps just some foolish bastard with hope. It was close enough that you could see someone bustling about on board, as if they were just realizing they'd taken a wrong turn.

"What to do?" someone asked.

Briggs looked through the glass, squinting. "We'll stay silent," he said. "We don't need attention."

A few men muttered. Staying still was good for survival, bad for greed. Greed always wants movement. Greed always wants something that clinks. And even when the gold is already in their stomachs, some still want at least that next little bite, so they can feel like kings in muddy boots.

"He could betray us," said the old man with the rotten teeth, tied to the mast, but still with enough tongue to throw dirt.

"He can't do anything to us," said Tom. "He's a raft of dreams."

"Dreams sail to ports," the old man murmured. "And ports sail to the crown."

There it was again, that thought. Betrayal. Hunt. And right in the middle, the flag, hanging above, pretending to be just fabric, while in reality it was like a magnet, attracting stupidity.

The small boat did indeed turn slightly in our direction. Perhaps out of curiosity. Perhaps out of fear. People are often curious about what could kill them. I saw a man standing on board, his hand over his eyes, and even from a distance I could sense his uncertainty. He didn't know whether to greet us or flee. And at that very moment, one of my men did something that would almost have made me laugh, if it hadn't been so dangerous.

He pointed upwards and shouted: "Pull them up!"

"What?" someone asked.

"The flag!" he shouted. "So he knows who we are!"

So stupid. So proud. So human. As if identity were a gift. As if it were a good idea to shout to the universe: Here! Right here! Come here and destroy us!

Briggs turned slowly. His gaze was cold. "No," he said.

"Why not?" the man shouted, and there was already that poisonous edge to his voice: Because you forbid it. Because you control it. Because you're afraid I'll get drunk on my own myth.

"Because we're not hunting today," Briggs said. "We're disappearing."

The man snorted. "We are pirates," he said, as if that were an argument.

"Pirates die," said Briggs.

A few laughed nervously. Dark humor, that plaster. But it didn't stick properly because it itched where the greed resides.

I joined the discussion. Not because I wanted to interfere, but because I realized how the flag issue had suddenly become not just a piece of fabric, but a fuse. And I don't like fuses, not since I learned how quickly things can explode when men are tired and greedy.

"The flag is up," I said calmly.

The man looked at me as if he'd been waiting for my sentence. "Exactly," he said. "It hangs like... like a curse if we don't show it. As if we were ashamed."

Shame. There it was. Men never officially feel shame. But when they do, it gets ugly. Shame is the little sister of anger.

"I'm not ashamed," I said.

"Then show it," he said.

Tom laughed briefly. "He wants you to dance, Bart."

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch. My laughter wanted to escape. Judgment. End of story. But I held it back because I realized: It's not about me. It's about what they see in me. It's about what they see in the flag. And once you start using symbols, they'll devour you.

"You want him to see us," I said to the man.

"Yes," he said. "So that he'll spread the word. So that they'll be afraid."

"So that we appear more important," I said.

He blinked. "So that we..." He searched for a word that didn't sound awkward. "So that we are."

I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Because "so that we are" sounds like a child afraid of not being counted. And many men at sea are exactly that: children in large bodies, still hoping that someone will tell them they are something.

"We are," I said, "because we breathe."

"Breathing is not living," he spat.

"Yes," I said. "That's enough for most people."

He started to make another move, but Briggs was faster. Briggs moved toward him, so close that the man must have smelled the tar and the command. "You want us to raise the flag," Briggs said. "Because you think fear is a weapon."

The man nodded defiantly.

"Fear is a weapon," Briggs said. "But it cuts in both directions."

The man swallowed, but he kept his gaze. Courage or stupidity. On a pirate ship, it's often the same thing.

Briggs pointed upwards. "This flag is not an ornament," he said. "It is a contract. Once it's properly raised, there's no going back. Then you're no longer a ship. Then you're a story that every officer carries to bed."

The man snorted. "So?"

Briggs' eyes hardened slightly. "And stories often end at the gallows."

Silence.

The little boat out there suddenly turned away again. Perhaps it had sensed our attitude. Perhaps it had simply rediscovered its courage and decided it'd rather stay poor than be dead. It grew smaller on the horizon, and with it went an opportunity. Or a danger. Depending on how you look at it.

The men on deck were still standing there, and I smelled their sweat. Not just from work. From resentment. From the feeling that Briggs was taking something away from them that was rightfully theirs: the right to be great.

I looked up at the flag. It hung there, half limp, and yet it was everywhere. In their eyes. In their voices. In the man's words: So that we may be.

And then I understood: This flag truly is a curse. Not because it puts on the crown. But because it makes men overestimate themselves. It suddenly turns starving bastards into heroes in their minds. And heroes die quickly. Heroes make mistakes because they believe they are immortal.

Tom stepped up beside me, quietly. "They love that thing," he murmured.

"They love what it promises them," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "And what does it promise you?"

I looked up. The fabric fluttered in the wind like a living animal. "That there is no going back," I said.

Tom nodded, as if he liked the idea. "There's no going back," he said.

"Easy is stupid," I said.

He laughed briefly. "Then we'll fit perfectly on this ship."

And somewhere deep in my gut, with Keene, I knew: The bastard doesn't even have to speak. The flag speaks for him. It hangs there, telling every man on board: Make up your mind. And when you make your mind, you pay.

Sometimes with gold.

Mostly with blood.

After the small boat, something lingered in the air. Not its sail, not its gaze, not its fear. But what it had awakened in us: this need to be seen. You can take everything from a man—rum, sleep, even a part of his hope—but if you take away his sense of self, he starts to become dangerous. More dangerous than any cannon.

Briggs acted as if the matter were settled. A "no," a course correction, a few orders, done. But a "no" doesn't disappear. A "no" lingers in people's minds like a splinter. And splinters are prone to igniting when there's enough greed in the blood.

In the afternoon the wind improved. Not friendly, but usable. The ship pulled forward, and for a moment it looked as if we might actually be able to lay down the crown. The men breathed more easily. And that's precisely when stupidity starts to dance again. Relief is like rum: too much of it, and you make a mess of things.

One of the men tied to the mast—one of the two who had tried to move the box during the night—suddenly began to talk. Not to shout. Not to curse. Just to talk as if he were in a pub telling a story to make people like him again.

“Briggs holds everything back,” he said loudly enough for many to hear. “He keeps us on a short leash so we’ll thank him if he gives us anything at all.”

A few men didn't listen. A few pretended to. But enough listened, and you can tell by their ears: their ears turn. An ear that listens is more dangerous than a drawn knife.

Briggs didn't go immediately. Briggs isn't the kind of man who reacts to every bark. But Tom did react. Tom reacts because Tom can't stand it when someone disturbs the order he needs to keep from going crazy.

Tom approached the mast and stood in front of the bound man. “You talk too much,” Tom said.

The man grinned, his lip still bloody from the last time. “I only tell the truth.”

Tom nodded slowly. “The truth is, you're going to keep your mouth shut now,” Tom said.

“Or?” asked the man, and in his voice was that courageous tremor: the last vestige of pride that has not yet realized that it is worthless at sea.

Tom didn't even draw his knife. He simply raised his hand and struck the man in the face. No theatrics. A blow like a broom. The man buckled to the right, hanging by the ropes, groaning. Tom leaned close to his ear. I didn't hear what Tom whispered, but I saw the man fall silent afterward. Silent like a child who has just learned that words don't always create sound.

The team saw it. They saw how quickly a mouth closes. Some found it reassuring. Some found it frightening. Both are bad when there's gold in your gut.

The woman came to me, stood beside the railing, and looked at the water as if it were her mirror. “You have a hunger for greatness,” she said softly.

“They are hungry for a share,” I said.

She shook her head. “Share is just an excuse,” she said. “They want to feel important. They want the flag to ennoble them.”

I looked up. The black flag was fluttering more intensely now, the wind had picked up again, and the emblem on it looked like an open mouth in the light. “The flag doesn't ennoble anyone,” I said.

“Tell them that,” she said.

“I told them,” I said. “With words. With blows. With looks. They only hear what they want to hear.”

The woman nodded. “Then it will get louder.”

I spat. "It's already loud."

"Not loud enough," she said.

She was right. It's loud enough when blood is spilled, not just threats. We were still in the phase where men tested each other and thought that was already war. War only truly begins when no one can turn back without losing face. And for men, faces are sometimes more important than lives.

Just before sunset, a gust of wind ripped the flag open. It cracked like a whip, and a few men flinched, even though it was just fabric. Just fabric. But when fabric sounds like it's going to hit you, it becomes real in your mind.

The captain – the one who was praying – suddenly stood next to me. He smelled of sweat and despondency. "She is a sign," he said.

"Yes," I said. "A sign of trouble."

He looked at me, seriously, as if he thought he was now the wise one. "A sign of damnation," he murmured.

I didn't laugh. I didn't feel like spreading my laughter back into the world. So I said, "Damnation is when you stop taking responsibility."

He blinked. "You speak like a priest," he said.

"Priests fuck children," I said. "I'm just fucking the world back."

He flinched, swallowed, and left again. Some truths silence even those who pray.

That evening, Briggs called a brief meeting. Nothing large. No speech. Just an announcement. "The flag stays as it is," he said. "No one touches it. No one plays with it. It's there. Period."

A few men muttered. One dared to ask: "Why?"

Briggs looked at him. "Because she's betraying us," Briggs said.

"But it also makes us..." the man began, and stopped because he realized that "big" now sounded embarrassing.

"She makes you stupid," said Briggs. "Nothing more."

The "nothing more" only added fuel to the fire. Not because it was wrong. Because it robbed them of their dreams. And men defend dreams, even if it means killing them.

Whispers came again during the night. Not directly by the boxes this time. More in corners. In shadows. And every whisper had the same theme: Who are we? What are we worth? What are we allowed to be?

I was walking across the deck once and heard two men behind the mainmast.

"If we lift them up properly," said one, "then they'll know that we're not afraid."

The other one laughed softly. "We are afraid," he whispered. "But maybe it looks different."

"If you seem different, you are different," said the first one.

I almost laughed again. That logic. Like a child who thinks that if they wear a hat, they're a king. But hat or flag, it's the same nonsense: you think a symbol makes you something you're not.

I stepped out of the shadows. "If you go after the flag," I said calmly, "then you go after me."

They froze. One stammered: "We... we're just talking."

"Talking is the beginning," I said.

"You are not Briggs," one of them said defiantly.

"No," I said. "I'm worse."

That might not have been wise. But it was true enough to have an effect. The two of them retreated, mumbled apologies, and disappeared. I stood there, feeling my own sweat on my back. Not from fear. From the weight I was carrying now. Briggs was right: the more order you become, the more those who crave chaos will hate you.

Later I heard a brief commotion downstairs. One of the guards at Keene's had been replaced, and the new one—a young, thin man—suddenly shouted. Not a cry of battle. A cry of disgust.

I went downstairs. Keene was sitting there, grinning, and the young guard was holding something in his hand. A small piece of fabric. Black. A rag.

"He had that... that in his mouth!" gagged the guard.

I took the piece from him. Black, fibrous. A piece of... the flag?

My stomach clenched. "Where from?" I asked.

Keene smiled. "He brought it to me," Keene whispered. "As a talisman. As good luck. So that I would be silent."

I stared at the guard. He went pale. "I... I just wanted to..."

"You wanted him to be silent," I said.

The boy nodded frantically. "Yes... he said if he has a piece of the flag, then... then..."

Keene chuckled softly. "Then he belongs," Keene whispered. "Then he's important."

Important. There it was again, the word no one says, but everyone smells. I held the scrap in my hand and realized how the ship suddenly felt even smaller. The flag wasn't just up top anymore. It was down below, inside, in Keene's mouth.

The flag hung like a curse.

And now she has been eaten too.

I held this black rag between two fingers as if it were a piece of shit that had suddenly learned to speak. Fabric that smelled of tar, of wind, of all the stupid stories men tell each other so they don't realize how small they are at night. And now it lay in my hand like proof: The curse doesn't just hang at the top. It creeps down. It seeks mouths. It seeks heads. It seeks the weak, those who believe a symbol can make them tougher.

The young guard stood there trembling. Not like a man afraid of being beaten. Like one who's just realized he's betrayed himself. That's the worst kind of fear. You can't run away from yourself. You can only get drunk until you forget.

Keene sat bound, smiling as if he'd just received an answer to a damned prayer. His eyes were calm. Too calm. He seemed like someone who does nothing and yet controls everything. Like the wind.

"You brought this to him," I said to the guard.

He swallowed, his throat moving like a fish on dry wood. "He said..." he stammered. "He said if he gets a piece of it, then... then he'll..."

"So what will he become?" I asked.

Keene whispered it for him, quietly, with relish: "Then I will become one of you. Then I will no longer be just the prisoner. Then I will be part of the story."

I felt the back of my neck grow hot. Not anger, but rather this clear, cold realization: The bastard works with everything. With air, with fear, with stupidity. And now with our flag, too. As if he were sewing himself into our myth, thread by thread, until later he can carry the whole thing.

"You fed him," I said to the guard.

The boy shook his head, tears almost welling up in his eyes, but he held them back because men here would rather die than cry. "I just wanted him to be quiet," he whispered.

Keene laughed softly. "Quiet is boring," he said. "You want meaning."

I turned to Keene. "You made him do it," I said.

Keene shrugged slightly, as if offended that I was suggesting he was competent. "I was just talking," he whispered. "Talking is just air. Air is free."

"You are not free," I said.

Keene grinned. "Tell that to the men upstairs," he whispered. "They give me their flag. Their fear. Their thoughts. You can bind me all you want. But you can't bind what they give me."

I would have loved to pull his teeth out and hang them around his neck as a souvenir. But that was exactly what he wanted: for me to snap, for me to become a legend who only speaks through violence. Then I would be his best proof.

I went outside, pulling the guard with me. The walk upstairs felt like a route to execution, even though no one knew yet who was dying that day. Upstairs, the night was damp and dark, and the flag snapped once in the wind, as if applauding.

Briggs stood at the helm, alone, as if he were the only thing on this ship that wasn't dreaming. I went to him and held up the scrap of paper.

Briggs' eyes didn't open wide. But I could see from his jaw: he didn't like this. Not because of the drugs. Because of control. Control was his god, and someone had just pissed in that god's mouth.

"Where from?" asked Briggs.

"Downstairs," I said.

Briggs looked at the guard. "You," he said.

The boy immediately began to talk, too fast, too much. "He said if he had a piece, then he wouldn't... no longer... he would..."

Briggs raised his hand, and the boy fell silent. Briggs doesn't need to shout. Briggs cuts words like ropes.

"You tore our flag," Briggs said. No question. A statement.

The boy whispered: "Just a little bit..."

"There is no small piece," Briggs said. "There is only the thing. Or the hole in it."

I felt the men nearby slowly drawing closer. Sounds attract them. Punishment attracts them. They pretend they're there by chance, but their eyes are greedy. Not for gold this time. For drama. Drama is the other drug.

Briggs held the scrap in his hand, examined it briefly as if checking whether it truly existed. Then he handed it back to me. "Burn it," he said.

I nodded.

Then Briggs looked at the guard again. "And you," said Briggs, "are no longer a guard from now on."

The boy breathed out as if that were the whole punishment.

Briggs let him bathe briefly in this relief. Then he said, "You are food."

Silence.

One of the men on the sidelines swallowed loudly. You can hear things like that when it gets really quiet.

"Please," whispered the boy, and then it almost came out: the tears, the shame, the naked panic.

Briggs remained calm. "You betrayed the ship," he said. "Not to the crown. To a prisoner. That's deeper. That's dumber."

"I just wanted to..." the boy began.

"You wanted to be important," Briggs said.

The boy stared at him.

Briggs nodded slowly. "Exactly," said Briggs. "And now you're going to be important."

Tom emerged from the shadows as if he had sensed the sentence. "How important?" Tom asked.

Briggs looked at Tom. "Important enough that everyone sees it," Briggs said.

A few men murmured. Some seemed satisfied. Some seemed nervous. Punishment both calms and poisons. Calms, because it establishes order. Poisons, because it makes everyone realize: That could be me, too.

Briggs ordered the boy tied to the mast, alongside the other prisoners. No mercy, no excuses, no "he's still young." Young is just another word for "will get even dumber."

The boy was strapped down; he no longer resisted. He was already gone, lost in his own mind, somewhere between prayer and vomiting. The captain began to mutter again, but this time it didn't sound like moralizing, more like a man sending his own fear to God because he didn't know what else to do with it.

"What happens now?" asked someone from the crowd.

Briggs slowly turned his head towards him. "Now work will happen," Briggs said.

"And him?" the man asked, nodding at the boy.

Briggs said: "He will stay like that until he understands that fabric is not protection."

"And what if he doesn't understand?" someone asked quietly.

Briggs' voice was calm. "Then he'll understand it in the water," he said.

No uproar. No discussion. Just this quiet, shared swallowing. I saw a few men look away. Not out of pity. Out of fear of seeing themselves in the boy.

I went to the small fire pit where we sometimes heat tar. I threw the rag in. Black turned to ash, faster than you think. That's how it is with symbols: they burn well if you really set them on fire. The smoke rose, and I swear, it smelled of mockery.

The woman stood next to me, looking into the fire as if she were glad that at least something up here was burning honestly. "He sold them a talisman," she said softly.

"He sells them everything," I said.

"And they buy," she said.

I looked up at the mast where the boy was hanging. His eyes were wide, his mouth open as if he were gasping for air. Air is the only thing he has left.

Tom came over to us and put a cigarette, or whatever he sometimes chews, between his lips. "Briggs isn't going to kill him right away," Tom said, almost disappointed. "He wants him to stink."

"Briggs wants it to work," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Your laughter works too."

I looked at Tom. "My laughter makes me a target," I said.

"Goals are important," said Tom. "Otherwise, no one will shoot."

The woman snorted softly. "If everyone shoots, everyone is a target," she said.

We stood there for a moment, listening to the ship. The wood creaked, the sea breathed, the flag beat at the top like an annoying heartbeat. And I realized: This curse isn't just fabric. It's what it makes of men. It makes them superstitious. It makes them proud. It makes them so damn willing to die for a sign, instead of simply living quietly.

Later, as the night grew deeper, I heard it again: whispering. Not by the crates. By the flag. The men were talking about whether it was "lighter" now because a piece was missing. Whether it was "angry" because it had been hurt. Whether it wanted "more sacrifices." Men give fabric a soul because they're afraid they don't have one themselves.

I went down to Keene again, just briefly, just to look into his eyes and see if he was satisfied.

He was satisfied.

"You did it," I said.

Keene blinked slowly. "What?" he whispered.

"The flag," I said. "You are now inside it."

Keene smiled. "I am within you," he whispered. "The flag is merely your most beautiful mirror."

"And the boy upstairs?" I asked.

Keene shrugged. "He wanted to be important," he whispered. "Now he is important. You are so generous."

I stared at him. "Someday," I said, "you won't talk anymore."

Keene grinned. "Then you speak for me," he whispered.

I went upstairs because otherwise I'd let the violence fester inside me again, like a disease. Up top, I stood at the stern and looked into the darkness. The wind had picked up again, the flag was fluttering, and it actually sounded as if it were laughing.

My name hung in the ship like smoke. The flag hung like a curse. The gold lay in the hold like a promise. And death always sailed along, impatient, as if he hadn't had any fun in a long time.

I thought: If you're at sea long enough, you learn that symbols don't work for you. You work for them. You bleed for them. You die for them. And if you're unlucky, you even start to believe it was your choice.

No mercy among men

The morning smelled of cold tar and a guilty conscience. The boy was still hanging from the mast, his wrists sore, his lips dry, his eyes like two wet coins no one wanted anymore. Beside him were the two who had been fiddling with the crates during the night. Three faces, three variations of the same stupidity. And all around them, a crew pretending it was none of their business, while in reality soaking up every twitch like rum.

Punishment here isn't about morality. Punishment is advertising. An ad big enough for even the biggest idiot to read: That's how it ends.

Briggs stood at the helm as if it were all weather. And for him, it was. He was the kind of man who didn't see pain as a tragedy, but as a tool. And the worst part was: he was often right. Without these tools, we would have long since become nothing more than a speck in the ocean.

The flag at the top flapped in the wind, and I heard that thing inside it again, that mocking fluttering that tells you: You're not just playing with fabric here. You're playing with a myth, and myths love to devour people.

Tom stepped next to me, spat over the railing, and looked as if he were contemplating the quality of the day. "If you look at it long enough," he muttered, "even pity makes you sick."

"Pity is a luxury," I said.

"Pity is stupidity," Tom corrected. "Luxury is rum."

I looked up at the mast. The boy tried to raise his head, as if he still had something to prove. That was the sad thing: even in punishment, the desire to be important remains. Keene had sold him exactly that, only in different words. Important. Part of history. Part of the flag. Part of the big shit.

"None of them got it," said Tom.

"They'll realize it when it hurts," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "It hurts."

"More," I said.

Tom laughed softly. Not a judgment. More like anticipation. And anticipation in Tom is dangerous, because it always smells of blood.

At midday, the wind became fickle again. It wasn't steady, but came in gusts, as if testing us. And with each gust, I saw the men unconsciously glance at the crates. As if checking whether the gold was still there. As if it might run away if the wind shifted. Men are ridiculous when they're greedy. Ridiculous and deadly.

One of the older sailors – a fellow with hands like ancient roots – came up to me and said quietly, "They're talking again."

"Who?" I asked, even though I could smell it.

He nodded towards the bow. There, three or four men stood too close together, their shoulders too near, their voices too small. Whispering is like mold. You only notice it when it stinks.

"What about?" I asked.

The old man made a face. "Mercy," he said.

I almost laughed. Mercy. That pretty word landlubbers use when they don't want to face the consequences of their own decisions. On a ship, mercy is usually just another name for fear.

"For whom?" I asked.

"For the boy," said the old man. "And for the two thieves. Some say Briggs is destroying us. That he's turning us against each other. That we..." He searched for the word. "...should remain human."

I spat. "Human," I said. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The old man shuddered. "That we are not like animals."

I looked at him. "We are animals," I said. "Just animals with knives."

He swallowed and left, as if he had just realized he was talking to the wrong man about fairy tales.

I went over to Briggs. Briggs was standing there, staring straight ahead as if he were struggling with the horizon. I stood next to him without asking, because asking questions here is sometimes seen as a sign of weakness.

"You're talking about mercy," I said.

Briggs' face remained calm. "Of course," he said. "When men see something that frightens them, they call it injustice."

"And?" I asked.

Briggs glanced briefly at the bound men. "Grace is contagious," he said. "Like stupidity. You give it once, and suddenly everyone thinks they're entitled to it."

"The boy is young," I said. Not because I wanted to save him. Because I wanted to know how Briggs would react.

Briggs' mouth barely twitched. "Young just means he has more time to get even dumber," he said.

"And the two of them?" I asked.

"The two tried to rob us in the night," said Briggs. "On a night when the Crown was looking for us. That's not theft. That's murder by detour."

That was it. The point where morality no longer matters. Only consistency.

I nodded. "What are you doing?" I asked.

Briggs didn't answer immediately. He let the pause sink in, so I could feel it. Then he said, "I'm ending it. Today."

The word "end" made something inside me feel cold. End means: blood. End means: one less body, and one more smell.

"You will throw them overboard," I said.

Briggs looked at me. "I'm going to throw one overboard," he said. "Not three."

I raised my eyebrows. "Why only one?"

"Because three deaths make a story," Briggs said. "One death makes a lesson."

Tom, who was standing a little behind us, grinned as if he'd been hoping for this. The woman approached quietly, and I saw her hear Briggs's sentence without blinking. She wasn't shocked. She was just tired. Tiredness is sometimes the most honest reaction.

"Which one?" I asked.

Briggs turned his gaze to the mast. The boy was hanging there, breathing shallowly, his eyes wide. Beside him were the two thieves, one stubborn, one already half-broken. Briggs said, "The one who talks the most."

The mouth. Always the mouth. Keene started it. Words are contagious. Words destroy teams.

Briggs called Tom. "Get him."

Tom walked to the mast like a man finally being served his supper. He grabbed one of the thieves—the one who had sold himself as the truth yesterday—roughly untied his bonds, and dragged him forward. The man staggered, cursed, spat, and tried to appear powerful. Trying to appear powerful with trembling knees is always embarrassing.

"You can't do that!" he shouted. "We are... we are..."

"What?" Tom asked kindly. "Comrades?"

The man looked at me, searching for something within me. Agreement. Grace. A small miracle. My name in his mind, like a lifeline.

"Say something!" he gasped.

I looked at him and said, "You have already said enough."

There it was. No consolation. No drama. Just the truth: There is no mercy among men here. Not because we are evil. Because otherwise we wouldn't survive.

Tom dragged him to the railing. The man lashed out, shouting and cursing. One of the crew shouted: "Briggs! That's enough!"

Briggs didn't even turn around. "Then look away," he said.

The man at the railing was now howling loudly. No more pride, no more platitudes, just this raw, animalistic sound. And I noticed how the crew reacted: some hardened because they had to protect themselves. Others softened because they suddenly felt their own throats. Both reactions are dangerous.

The woman stood next to me and said softly, "This is the moment."

"Which one?" I asked.

"The moment they decide whether Briggs is their enemy," she said. "Or their protector."

Tom held the man over the railing, not all the way, just enough so the sea below was visible. The water was dark, calm, indifferent. The man thrashed about, shouting, "Please! Please!"

"Please" is an ugly word on board because it shows you thought there was another door. There are no doors on the sea. Only edges.

Briggs slowly approached. He positioned himself so everyone could see him. Not for show. As a cut. "You," Briggs said to the man, "tried to steal the ship. Not gold. The ship."

The man sobbed. "I just wanted... just my share..."

Briggs nodded. "Your share is water," he said.

And then Briggs gave Tom a small sign.

Tom let go.

No dramatic scream, just a short, choppy noise, then a splash, as if someone were throwing a sack of meat into the sea. A few men flinched. One cursed. The captain muttered again. God, the old spectator.

We stared at the spot in the water where he had disappeared. No hand. No head. Nothing. The sea takes quickly if you mess with it.

Briggs stopped at the railing and said calmly, "Back to work."

And that was it. No mercy. No goodbye. Just work, so you don't have to think.

I turned around and saw the faces. Some were pale. Some were blank. Some were angry. And anger is what Keene loves. Anger is what feeds gold. Anger is what makes flags great.

The woman looked at me, and there was no judgment in her gaze. Only the observation: Now it has happened. Now the curse is a little stronger again.

Tom came back, wiped his hands on his trousers as if he had only moved a barrel. "There," he said. "Now they can go back to sleep."

I looked up at the flag. It was flapping in the wind, as if applauding. And I thought: No. Sleeping is going to be harder now. Not because of the dead man in the water.

Because of what is rising up in the minds of the living and quietly saying: If he could, I can too. If Briggs can, I can too. If death is always a passenger, why should I even bother being good?

No mercy among men.

Just the next decision that reeks of blood.

The splash hung in the air, like a sound undecided about whether to leave. The sea had swallowed the guy like a bad joke, and yet everyone stared at the spot as if expecting him to resurface and apologize. People like to believe in second chances, as long as they aren't their own.

I stood there, hands still, head racing. You throw a man overboard and suddenly everyone sees the railing differently. Before, it's wood. After, it's a door. And everyone silently wonders: For whom will it open next?

Briggs went back to the helm as if he'd just cut a rope. No words, no looking back. That's how you do it when you don't want the crew to realize how much such a decision costs you inside. Or when it really costs you nothing. With Briggs, I was never sure which would be worse.

Tom paused briefly, looked into the water as if checking if the guy down there was still making any noise. Then he spat and said, half to me, half to the world: "At least he can't do math anymore."

A few men laughed. A thin, sick laugh. The laughter of people who have just realized their lives hang by a thread, and who still have to play along, because otherwise fear will consume them. Dark humor is sometimes just a band-aid on a raw throat.

I went back to the bound men. The boy looked at me as if I were his final judge. His lips were open, his tongue dry. A few flies had even dared to circle his mouth, because flies have no morals. Flies are the most honest creatures at sea. They go where it stinks, and they stay.

"Please," croaked the boy. Just that one word, and it hurt more than a blow. Not because it was touching. Because it was so damn human.

I said, "Hang in there."

That was it. No hug. No comfort. Enduring is the only tenderness you'll receive here.

The second thief—the one who hadn't gone overboard—stared at me, his eyes filled with both hatred and hope. He wanted to do both: scream at me and beg me at the same time. Men hate it when they need you.

"You are pigs," he said, quietly, hoarsely.

"Yes," I said. "But we are swimming pigs."

He spat, but the saliva stuck to his lip. "You're killing us over a coin," he growled.

"We're killing you for what you're doing," I said. "Coins are just excuses. You were ready to devour the ship while the Crown was after us."

He laughed dryly. "The crown," he said. "Always the crown. Always this specter, to keep us down."

There it was again: small. Important. To be big. That was the disease. Gold is only the germ. The rest is vanity.

"You're not small if you stay silent," I said. "You're just not dead."

He wanted to answer, but then Briggs' voice came across the deck, short and sharp, and the men sprang back into action. Ropes, sails, course. Work to keep them from thinking. The ship was moving, and for a moment it acted as if everything were normal again. As if we hadn't just given a comrade to the sea.

But normal was gone.

The afternoon grew hotter, and heat makes men even dumber. You smell yourself, you smell the other person, you smell the wood, and eventually all you smell is impatience. Impatience is betrayal's little brother.

I heard the whispering again, somewhere in the back, near the barrels. Not loud, not stupid. Quiet and slow. That's how men talk who have already decided they no longer want to be decided.

"Briggs will throw us all into the water," said a voice.

"Only if you give him a reason," said another.

"There's always a reason," came the reply. "Gold is reason enough."

That almost made me laugh again. Gold as an excuse. No, gold isn't an excuse. Gold is a stage. The excuse is what was already rotten inside you.

I didn't go directly towards them. I just positioned myself so they could see me if they turned their heads. And of course, they turned their heads. People are curious about the blade, even if they pretend they aren't afraid.

A man stepped out from the corner as if he'd been there by chance. Broad shoulders, dirty hands, the look of a dog that's just learned its master bites. "We get it," he said.

"What did you understand?" I asked.

He swallowed. "That Briggs is serious."

"And?" I asked.

He glanced briefly at the boxes, then back at me. "So you're serious," he said.

I nodded. "Good."

He stopped, as if he expected more. Maybe he wanted me to lecture him, to explain why all this was necessary. Men love explanations because explanations are like excuses. But I gave him nothing. Sometimes nothing is the only way to show a man he's not negotiating.

He walked away, and I heard him whispering again immediately. More quietly this time. That was a victory, but a small one. Small victories are dangerous because they make you think you're in control.

Later the captain came to me, the one who was praying, with his wet eyes and his moralizing mouth. "We are losing our souls," he said softly.

I looked at him. "Which ones?" I asked.

He flinched. "You... you're mocking," he muttered.

"I spit," I said. "Mockery is for people with time on their hands."

He raised his hands as if he wanted peace. "There are limits," he said.

"Yes," I said. "The railing."

He turned pale. "That was unnecessary," he whispered.

"What's needed is a word you only say if you're not the one doing it," I said. "If you can't stand it, look away. But stop pretending God has an opinion here that will save us."

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then he left. And I knew: He would pray again later, but this time not for the dead man. For himself. Prayer is often just self-protection.

As the sun sank lower, something happened that frightened me more than any warship. The men fell silent. Not the work-like kind of silent. That other kind of silent. That smooth, polite silentness where you realize: they've gathered themselves. They've forced their horror into a mold that reeks of planning.

Tom noticed it too. He came over to me, leaned casually against the railing, as if it were just another day. "They're too clean," he murmured.

"Yes," I said.

"Do you want me to throw another one?" he asked, quite calmly, as if he were suggesting tipping a barrel overboard so the deck wouldn't stink so much.

"No," I said.

Tom snorted softly. "What are you waiting for? A speech? Insight?"

"I'm not waiting," I said. "I'm listening."

He grinned crookedly. "Hearing is soft."

"Listening is smart," I said. "Anyone can cut."

Tom acted as if I had insulted him, but he liked it. Tom likes resistance. Resistance gives his life meaning.

"Briggs will make another cut tonight," said Tom.

"Who?" I asked.

Tom nodded towards the mast. "Not kill the boy," he said. "But break him. So that no one else gets the idea to eat cloth."

I looked at the boy. He was hanging there, and I saw: he was already half broken. Not physically. In his gaze. There was this dull, numb feeling: I am not important. That's the hardest realization a young man can have. And it's necessary if you want to survive. Nevertheless, it tasted bitter.

"Keene will celebrate this," I said.

Tom grinned. "Keene celebrates everything that stinks."

I nodded. "And you?"

Tom looked at me, and for a moment there was something genuine in his gaze. "I celebrate when we're alive," he said.

"You party a lot," I said.

"Because I live often," he said, and that was the most honest sentence of the day.

Night fell again. The wind picked up, the flag flapped as if it were slapping every man on board in the face. The gold lay in my belly, and I felt the crates grow heavier, not from metal, but from meaning. Meaning makes everything heavy.

I went back to Briggs. He was standing at the wheel, his face like stone, his eyes alert. "You won't forget it," I said.

Briggs barely nodded. "Let them," he said.

"This could change," I said.

"Everything can tip over," Briggs said. "That's why I'll tip over first, before they do."

I looked at him. "No mercy," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained straight ahead. "It's a blessing that we'll still be sailing tomorrow," he said. "Everything else is sentimentality."

Sentimentality. The word tasted of land, of women's voices, of beds. And here at sea, sentimentality is just another name for dying with your eyes open.

I walked away, and as I ran across the deck, I heard Keene's whisper again somewhere below, like an insect in the wall. No clear sentence, just this feeling: He's there. He's with us. And he's waiting for the next moment when we hurt ourselves because we think it's justice.

No mercy among men.

Only edges, knives, wind.

And a sea that swallows everything, regardless of whether you were right about it.

In the night, every wooden plank reeks of decision. This isn't poetic nonsense, it's physics: when you can't see what's coming in the dark, you feel it. You feel it in the footsteps that are too quiet. In the voices that suddenly become polite. In the moment when even Tom swears less, because he realizes that words might not be enough tonight.

The boy hung from the mast, barely making a sound. No more whimpering, no more begging. Just shallow breathing, as if he were counting air because it was the only thing he had left. The other two hung beside him like bad memories. One stared stubbornly straight ahead, as if rigidity could save him. The other had that look men get when they understand that "later" isn't a promise, but a joke.

Briggs waited. Of course he waited. Briggs is the kind of man who doesn't punish in anger. He punishes like a craftsman. Measure first, then saw. And the longer he waits, the more the

crew believes they might still have some influence. And influence is the sugar you use to attract rats.

Shortly after midnight, Briggs called for two men. Not Tom first. Two of the quiet ones, the ones who don't speak, who only act. Tom was there immediately nonetheless, because Tom never misses a sound when there's the smell of blood.

"Get down," said Briggs, and he meant the boy.

The boy lifted his head slightly, and his eyes flickered as if hoping that this meant "down": down from the ropes, into life. Hope can be so foolish.

They untied him. Not gently. His body slumped because he had been in the same position for too long. His legs gave out. Two men supported him, dragging him like a broken sail.

The team didn't officially acknowledge it. But they were there. Of course. In shadows. In corners. Halfway through some kind of "task." Everyone wanted to see if this was the end or just another chapter in their suffering, one they'd recount later in a dive bar, if they still had any teeth.

Briggs didn't lead them to the railing. That was the first thing that surprised me. Instead, he took the boy to the bow, where the waves are louder and the wind hits you more directly, as if the sea itself were trying to beat you. It's not a comfortable place to stand. It's like standing before an exam.

"Knee," said Briggs.

The boy hesitated. He was too tired to be defiant, and yet defiance is sometimes the last thing a man has left. Then his knees dropped. Plop. Not gracefully. How much dignity can a person possibly have after hanging from a mast for hours?

Briggs stood in front of him. No audience gesture. No dramatic pause. He simply said, "Why?"

The boy stared at the planks as if they could give him the answer. "I... I wanted..." he began.

"Say it," said Briggs.

The boy swallowed. "I wanted to belong."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Not pity. Recognition. Many heard it and thought: Yes. Exactly. Me too. I also wanted to belong when I first smelled blood. When I first stood under that flag and thought I was somebody.

Briggs nodded slowly. "You belong here," Briggs said.

The boy raised his head, a spark. Foolish enough to believe that was mercy.

Briggs continued: "You belong to stupidity."

The spark died again.

"You gave drugs to a prisoner," Briggs said. "You fed a curse and thought it would kiss you in return."

The boy whispered: "He said—"

"He said," Briggs cut off. "And you heard what you wanted to hear."

Then Briggs turned his head to the crew. "Look at him," he said calmly. "Not because I enjoy it. But because any one of you could be just as stupid."

That hit home. You saw it in their faces. Some hardened. Some got angry. Some fell silent, because they suddenly felt their own little secret creeping into their minds.

"What happens now?" someone asked again. The same question as always, only each time with more fear underneath.

Briggs didn't even look. "Now we'll make him useful," he said.

Tom grinned as if that were his favorite phrase.

Briggs gave a signal, and the silent men fetched a length of rope and a bucket. The bucket contained tar, thick, black, still warm from the fire in which I had burned the rag. The smell rose like a fist.

The boy stared at the tar, and you could see him understand: This isn't water. This isn't cleaning. This is marking.

"No," he whispered. No more "please." Just "no." A small "no" against a large ship.

Briggs didn't kneel. He did nothing human. He took the bucket, dipped his hand in, and the tar formed strings like spit. Then he grabbed the boy by the chin, not brutally, just firmly, and smeared the tar all over his mouth. Broadly. Thickly. Black. As if he were giving him a new face.

The boy gagged, shook his head, but the hand stayed put. The tar clung, seeping into every crack, every little crease. Then Briggs tied the rope around his head, tightly, as if sewing the tar in place. Not to suffocate him. To keep it there.

"You wanted to belong," Briggs said, his voice so calm it was worse than screaming. "Now you belong. You wear the black."

The boy howled, but you could barely hear it because the tar muffled his mouth. Just a dull thud, like an animal suffocating in a sack. And that sound did something to the crew. Because they realized: This is worse than going overboard. Going overboard is fast. This is slow and visible.

One of them shouted: "That's too much!"

There it was. The line.

Tom took a step forward without anyone having to call him. "Too much is when you're still talking," Tom said.

"He's just a boy!" the man shouted again, and now there was more than one of them. Two others murmured their agreement. Not loudly, but enough.

I felt the air tense. That's exactly how it begins. Not with knives. With words that suddenly sound harmonious together.

Briggs straightened up, wiping the tar off his own trouser leg as if it were dirt. "A boy," he said. "So?"

The man took a step forward. Courage or stupidity. "We are losing ourselves," he said. "We will—"

Briggs raised his hand. Not as a stop signal. More like a judge saying: That's enough. And I realized: If Briggs gives in now, it's over. Then the crew is no longer a crew. Then it's a market. Then the gold will be divided, stolen, torn apart, and in the end, everyone will be swimming alone.

"You think grace makes you better," said Briggs. "It only makes you weaker."

"This is not mercy, this is torture!" the man shouted, his face red because he had to work himself up into a rage to justify the step he had just taken.

Briggs nodded. "Yes," said Briggs. "It's torture. Torture of stupidity. So that it dies before we do."

Someone made a noise in the back. A short clink. Metal. Not loud, but I heard it immediately. Someone had a coin or a ring in their hand. Just for a moment. Maybe out of nervousness. Maybe out of habit. Maybe because gold always turns up at the worst possible moment.

And suddenly everything was there: penalty, gold, flag, Keene's poison. A lovely cocktail of shit.

I saw the man who had shouted "too much," and I saw his gaze briefly flicker to the crates. Not consciously. Reflex. And then I understood: It was never just about the boy. It was about who had the right to decide. Briggs. Or greed. Or the mob.

I took a step forward, to where I was visible to everyone. No drama. Just presence.

"Listen," I said, my voice dry, as if I had sand in my throat. "If you break Briggs tonight, you'll break the crates tomorrow. And if you break the crates tomorrow, we'll be dead the day after. Not maybe. Definitely."

The man stared at me. "You're his dog," he spat.

"No," I said. "I am your survival. And that disgusts me just as much as it disgusts you."

A few laughed nervously. Again that thin laugh that says: I don't know whether to cry or lash out.

The woman stood at the edge and said quietly, almost to herself: "There it is again, the election."

Tom grinned crookedly. "Voting is for people with land under their feet."

Briggs didn't take a step back. He pointed at the boy, who was now kneeling, tar on his face, dew taut, eyes wet. "Look at him," said Briggs. "And consider whether you really want Keene to sell you any more."

The word Keene was like a cold hand. You could feel it in the ranks. Keene was down, but his name was up. And when a name is up, he's almost free.

The man who had shouted "too much" was breathing heavily. He looked at the others, seeking backup. But backup is cowardly when it suddenly realizes it might fall too. Two of the muttering men looked away. One even took a half-step back.

The man stopped, but his courage waned. He spat, not so loudly anymore. "Screw it," he muttered. And left.

That was the moment when the night didn't explode. Not because we were good. Because fear was still greater than pride.

Briggs nodded to the silent men. "Tie him up again," he said of the boy. "And if he's still breathing tomorrow, he can go to work."

The boy was hauled up, back to the mast, secured again. His mouth was black, his gaze broken. The crew dispersed, slowly, as if they all wanted to pretend they hadn't seen it. That's how survival works: you look away so you can still function the next day.

I paused for a moment, looked up at the flag. It fluttered, hard, aggressive. Black upon black. As if it were swallowing it all up and wanting even more.

Tom came to me, quietly. "You held her tonight," he said.

"I was just preventing them from getting dumber," I said.

Tom grinned. "That's holding."

The woman stood next to us. "No mercy," she said.

"None," I said.

And while the ship sailed on and the sea acted as if nothing had happened, I knew: This wasn't a victory. It was only a reprieve. Keene sits below, gathering new words. The gold lies in the belly, gathering new hands. The flag hangs above, gathering new idiots who believe they are immortal as long as black flutters above them.

No mercy among men.

Only rules that you write in blood, because ink washes away too quickly here.

I counted scars instead of years

I stopped counting time the way they do on land at some point. On land, they count years like coins, jingle them around, and act like they're worth something. At sea, the ocean counts you differently. It doesn't ask how old you are. It asks how many times you've bled and still stood. I counted scars instead of years because scars, at least, are honest. Years lie. Years pretend that anything happened between yesterday and today except for more dirt.

The boy with the tar in his mouth was hanging from the mast again, and every time I passed him, I saw that silent scream in his eyes. Not from pain. From shame. Shame is worse than pain because pain goes away when you die, but shame sticks like tar. And the tar wasn't just stuck to his mouth. It was stuck to the crew now. Everyone knew: That could have been me. Everyone suddenly felt their own face as if it were something you could lose.

Briggs acted as if it were a normal morning. He let the men work, let the bound ones hang, let the wind push us. His normal is a knife: smooth, cold, silent. And as the planks creaked, I felt something quietly stirring inside the people. Not open mutiny. More like this toxic gathering. Like when you have a boil and you pretend it's just a pimple.

I walked past the crates and saw the tarpaulins. You wouldn't believe how much a piece of fabric can suddenly seem like an enemy. We'd already talked about flags, curses, symbols. But these tarpaulins were symbols too. They said: Beneath them lies what makes you ugly. And that's precisely why no one could stop thinking about it.

Tom came over to me, smelling of sweat and night. "You look like someone who wants to do some calculations," he muttered.

"I'm not calculating," I said. "I'm remembering."

Tom snorted. "Memory is also a form of accounting."

He was right, the bastard. You add things up whether you want to or not. You add up dead people, add up mistakes, add up the times you were too late or too early. And in the end, you have a total that keeps you up at night.

I went to the railing and laid my forearm on it. The bandage was off, the wound was closed, but the scar was there, a crooked thing that looked like a small lightning bolt unsure where to strike. I ran my finger over it. Not gently. More like a probing test. This scar had a date, just not on the calendar. It had the smell of blood and fear and that lucid second when you realize: You're not made of iron, you're made of flesh.

I thought of the others. The ones on my head, the ones on my back, the ones on my ankles, where ropes had ripped your skin open because you thought you could pull harder than wood. The small one on my stomach, from a bottle in a pub, back when I still thought fighting was a game. The big one on my thigh, a splinter from a cannon, which showed me how quickly you can go from "I am the king" to "I am just a sound."

Scars are like a second team you always carry with you. Silent, but heavy. And the more you have, the less you need a calendar. You know how many winters you've seen because you know how often the cold reopens those old wounds.

The woman stepped next to me. She didn't say anything immediately, because that's not her style. She comes, stands, lets you know she's there, and only then does she speak, as if every word were a knife she doesn't want to waste.

"You're looking at your skin," she said.

"I'm looking at my life," I said.

She nodded once. "You count," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Years don't matter to me."

"Years are for men who think they are getting old," she said.

"Growing old is a myth," I said.

She smiled briefly. Not a real smile, more of a gesture that said: You get it. Then she looked at the mast, at the boy. "That one," she said quietly, "will bear his first real scar on his head. And that never heals."

"He wanted to be important," I said.

"What's important is a word that kills men," she said.

I heard footsteps behind us. The captain, the one praying, came, clinging to the wood as if it were his last resort. "We should do something for the boy..." he began.

I turned to him. "If you bring up God again while Briggs is spreading tar, I'll stick a prayer right in your face," I said.

He blinked, startled, as if I had just shown him that priests bleed too. "You're lost," he whispered.

"You're lost if you still believe there's any salvation here," I said. "Go and pray quietly, so at least you don't disturb the wind."

He left. And I sensed a few men had overheard. Some smirked. Some hated me for it. I didn't care. If you start wanting to be liked, you're dead. Not physically. But as a leader. And on a ship like this, it's the same end, just without the splash.

Later, when the sun was higher in the sky, Briggs came to me. No pathos. He said, "Stay the course. No plunder. No ports."

"And the gold?" I asked.

Briggs' gaze flickered briefly to the tarpaulins, as if the word itself were a form of filth. "The gold stays," he said. "Until I decide."

"The men won't be able to stand it," I said.

"Then they die," said Briggs.

So simple. So brutal. And yet it wasn't just brutality. It was mathematics. Briggs calculates with corpses because he knows that otherwise you'll eventually stop calculating and just cry.

"You count too," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained straight ahead. "I'm counting opportunities," he said. "Scars are just the price you pay."

Receipt. Beautiful word. It suits gold. It suits death. Everything here has a receipt, but nobody signs it.

When Briggs was gone again, I heard a dull thud from the mast. The boy had tried to speak. The tar was holding him back. He only made a stifled noise, and he tugged at his bonds as if he could tear the shame from his face.

A few men glanced over, quickly looked away, quickly looked again. Like at a car crash. You don't want to look, but you do, because you need to know how close you are to it yourself.

I went to him. Not gently. Not as a savior. As reality.

"Listen," I said quietly.

His eyes sought mine, pleaded, hated, all at once.

"This," I said, tapping him not on the tar but on his chest, "will stay with you. You won't wash it away. You won't pray it away. You won't laugh it away."

He made that dull noise again.

"But if you survive," I said, "it will be your first number. And every number after that will make you tougher. Not better. Tougher."

He blinked, tears ran down his face and stuck to the tar.

"If you think toughness makes you important," I said, "then you haven't learned anything. Toughness only keeps you alive. You're not important to the sea. You're not important to the crown. At most, you're important to the man standing next to you when things get rough."

I left him standing there because more words would only push him back into dreams. Dreams are dangerous. Dreams are where Keene lives.

And as I walked back across the deck, I felt my scars tug in the wind. As if they were counting. One, two, three. As if they were saying: You're still here. You haven't yet paid what you'll eventually have to pay.

I counted scars instead of years.

Because years make you feel like you have time.

And at sea, time is just another word for happiness, which eventually leaves you.

In the afternoon, when the sun beats down dully on the deck and even the wind smells of sweat, scars begin to speak. Not really, not with voices, but with this pulling, this burning, as if they were saying: Do you remember? Do you remember, you bastard, what you paid for this? The body is a book, and scars are the pages you can no longer tear out.

We had another one of those days where everything looked still, yet was seething. The Crown was nowhere to be seen, but that only meant she was brushing her teeth somewhere else. Keene was down below, bound, yet he was in the air. Gold was under tarpaulins, yet it was in our eyes. The Flag was up high, yet it was in our stomachs. And the boy with the tar was at the mast like a living shield: no mercy, no excuses, no fairy tales.

I sat down briefly at the edge of the deck, not because I needed a break, but because I wanted to feel my legs. Legs are a funny thing. You forget what they can endure until they eventually give out.

Tom came, didn't sit down, remained standing. Tom rarely sits down. Sitting is for people who think they're safe. "You didn't sleep last night," he said.

"Neither do you," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "I sleep when it's quiet. Which is never."

I nodded. "Calm is dangerous."

Tom looked at the boxes. "It's also quiet when someone is planning."

"Planning is normal," I said.

Tom spat. "Planning is murder when it happens here."

There was something to that. On land, someone plans how to build a house. Here, someone plans how to get you out of their way. And since gold came along, "out of the way" wasn't a metaphor anymore. It was a course of action.

"You have many scars," Tom said suddenly.

"You too," I said.

Tom grinned. "Mine are on the inside," he said. "Nobody can see them."

"Then they'll still be counted," I said.

He laughed briefly. "You're even counting mine now."

"I'm counting everything," I said. "Because otherwise I'll forget what's killing us."

Tom fell silent for a moment. Then he said, "The men will talk again tonight."

"They're always talking," I said.

"It's different today," said Tom. "They're talking about you."

I felt a brief chill in the back of my neck. Not fear. More like that dry, knowing feeling: if they're talking about you, you're either already a legend or already a target. And both often end the same way.

"What do they say?" I asked.

Tom shrugged. "That you're Briggs' dog," he said. "That you laugh like a judgment. That you hit when necessary. Some like it. Some hate it."

"And you?" I asked.

Tom grinned crookedly. "I use it," he said.

So honest. So Tom. He wasn't loyal out of love. He was loyal because it worked. Working is the only form of morality here.

The woman approached, holding a knife and sharpening it on a stone, slowly, patiently. The sound was faint, but it tensed the air. "They're talking about Briggs too," she said without looking up.

"They're always talking about Briggs," I said.

"No," she said. "They're talking about Briggs eventually falling."

That was a statement that didn't feel like a rumor. More like a weather forecast.

Tom snorted. "Briggs will only fall when the ship is on fire."

"Ships are burning," the woman said.

I looked at her. "Who?" I asked.

She raised her gaze, and her eyes were calm. Too calm. "No one is saying names," she said. "Not yet. But they are thinking names."

"Keene thinks of names," I said.

She nodded. "Keene thinks scars," she said. "He knows where it hurts."

I stood up and walked a little way across the deck, just to see how the men looked when they thought you weren't looking. That's the trick. You walk by, act like it's routine, and look out of the corner of your eye. Corners of eyes are more honest than faces.

There was the old man with the rotten teeth, still bound, but his eyes were lively. He was speaking softly to one of the younger men. I only caught snatches: "...we need..."
"...otherwise..." "...Briggs..."

There was the broad fellow, furniture on the mast, but in his eyes there was a spark again. Sparks are dangerous when you throw them onto a ship full of tar.

The guards were by the crates, taking turns, and one of them made this brief, unconscious stroke of the tarpaulin, as if he wanted to feel the gold beneath his hand. As if he were testing whether it really existed. Greed is like an itch. You can't control yourself.

I went downstairs to Keene. Not because I wanted to. Because I needed to know if the bastard was really as deep inside as it felt.

Keene sat there, bound, his lips dry, his eyes bright. When I arrived, he didn't smile immediately. He waited. Keene loves waiting. Waiting gives him power, because you realize that it's you who's coming.

"You count today," Keene said quietly before I said anything.

"What am I counting?" I asked.

"Scars," Keene whispered. "You think scars make you real. They just make you predictable."

"You're predictable too," I said.

Keene raised his eyebrows slightly. "Yes," he whispered. "I am the poison. You are the cups."

I stepped closer. "They're talking upstairs," I said.

Keene nodded slowly, as if he'd sensed the weather. "Of course," he whispered. "They're afraid. And fear is a topic of conversation."

"You're feeding it," I said.

Keene grinned now. "I only feed what's already hungry," he whispered. "Gold, Flag, Death. I just sit here and watch you all bar your teeth at each other."

"And what if I take your teeth?" I asked.

Keene laughed softly, without joy. "Then the rest will grow," he whispered. "If you take my mouth away, they will speak for me. If you kill me, I will become a legend. And legends have no chains."

That was his trick. He had an answer for every option that sounded like a loss. And I realized: Keene isn't dangerous because he's smart. He's dangerous because he knows how people work. He knows that men would rather believe in curses than in their own responsibility.

I went back up. The wind had shifted, the flag was beating harder. And suddenly I felt an old scar tug on my ribcage, one I barely noticed anymore. It tugged at the exact moment I stepped onto the deck, as if saying: You know this. This is the beginning of something you'll later file away under "survived."

In the evening, dinner was served: thin soup, bread, and rum sipped in small amounts. Rum was no longer a celebration. Rum was a solace. Solace is dangerous because it softens the senses, and softness breeds mistakes.

I didn't sit with the men. I stayed on the sidelines. Observing has become my way of life. And while I stood there, I heard one of them say, "Briggs will take even more from us."

Another replied: "Then we'll take it beforehand."

There it was again. Taking. The word that destroys everything. It's the opposite of holding on. And in this team, holding on was precisely the only thing keeping us alive.

Tom came back up beside me. "When it starts," he murmured, "I want to be at the front."

"You're always at the front," I said.

Tom grinned. "Yes," he said. "Because I don't want to count. I want to cut."

"I don't want to cut," I said.

Tom looked at me. "Then you'll get cut out eventually," he said.

That wasn't a threat. That was a prediction. And scars are ultimately just proof that predictions are sometimes right.

I counted scars instead of years.

And tonight I felt: The next number is already waiting.

Night fell slowly, like a drunkard who can't decide whether to go home or walk into a trap. The sky darkened, but it didn't clear. Rather, it became dirty, cloudy, as if someone had scattered ashes upon it. And that's exactly how the ship felt: like a place where too much ashes had fallen, and no one had the strength left to sweep them away.

I stayed awake. Of course I stayed awake. Being awake has become my job, my curse, my substitute for everything that once resembled rest. And that night I felt how the men really did breathe differently. Not faster. Not louder. But collectedly. That's the terrible thing: when fear becomes quiet, it becomes dangerous. Then it becomes plan.

I went over to the crates. Two guards were standing there, and they looked like they were on guard duty. But their eyes were tired. And tiredness is like an open window.

"Who was here?" I asked quietly.

One of them flinched. "Nobody," he said too quickly.

"Then you're blind," I said.

He swallowed, glanced briefly to the side, as if checking whether he was allowed to lie. Then he whispered: "A few men were... just looking."

"Looking is the first step," I said.

"They did nothing," said the other.

"Not yet," I said.

I left them standing there and continued walking, as if I were simply patrolling. But I made a detour so I could see into the shadows behind the barrels. And there they were. Three, four men. Not the loudest. Not the stupidest. That was dangerous. The most dangerous are the ones who are silent and yet believe they are right.

The old man with the rotten teeth was there too, tied to the mast, but his voice was close enough that they answered him. He whispered, they whispered back. Like a damned rope across a distance.

I stayed in the shadows, listening. Not everything, just fragments, but fragments are sometimes enough to see the whole corpse.

"...Briggs..."

"...never distributed..."

"...tonight..."

"...before..."

"...and him there..." – that was probably me.

I didn't step outside immediately. I waited until they said something that would give them away.

And he came.

"If we get rid of Briggs, the beard is the problem," one said.

There I was. Not as a person, not as a comrade. As a beard. As a symbol. As an obstacle.

Another whispered: "He laughs like judgment. If we let him, he'll hang us all."

"Then we'll hang him first," said the first one.

It was so simple, so disgustingly logical, that I almost laughed again. But I didn't laugh. I felt an old scar on my shoulder blade tug, a scar from a knife I hadn't seen, because back then I also thought loyalty was something you could buy.

I stepped out of the shadows.

They froze. Four faces, four variations of: shit.

"Who is hanging whom?" I asked calmly.

No one answered immediately. Then one of them made the mistake men always make: he became brave because he thought he had to be brave. "We're just talking," he said.

"You're talking about killing," I said. "It's not just that."

Another man raised his hands. "It's about fairness," he said.

I almost threw up. Fairness. That word always comes up right before someone pulls a knife. Fairness is a mask for greed.

"The only fair thing is that you'll still be breathing tomorrow," I said.

"Briggs is letting us starve," one of them spat.

"Briggs will let you live," I said.

They were silent, and in the silence I heard the boy somewhere on the mast make a dull noise with tar in his mouth. Not a word, just this: I'm still here. I'm an example. And yet they continue planning. People learn slowly.

"Go to sleep," I said.

The brave man grinned thinly. "You're not Briggs," he said.

"No," I said. "I'm closer."

That wasn't even a saying. That was a fact. Briggs is at the wheel. I'm standing between you and the edge.

The brave man took a half step. Not directly towards me. Just enough to show: I'm not afraid. But his hand unconsciously moved to the side, to where his knife was. Hands betray.

I saw it. I knew what was coming. And I also knew that this ship was deciding whether tomorrow it would still be a ship or just a bunch of men on wood.

Tom was suddenly there. Of course he was there. Like a shadow that smells knives. He stood behind me, invisible to the men, but I felt him like heat on my back.

"Say it," Tom whispered so quietly that only I heard it. "Say one word, and I'll cut."

That was Tom. Simple. Clear. Blood as the solution.

I breathed out. I didn't want Tom to cut. Not because I'm soft. Because I knew: if Tom cuts, it won't be a lesson. It will be war. And war on board is like fire: you light it, and in the end, even the one holding the torch gets burned.

"Listen," I said to the men. "I'll give you one sentence. And you'll remember it, or you'll die."

They stared at me.

"Gold is not your life," I said. "The ship is your life. And Briggs is what holds the ship together. If you take him, you take yourself."

The brave one spat. "You just want to keep your place."

“My place is the night,” I said. “Your place is work.”

“Work doesn’t make us rich,” said one, and his voice sounded like a child complaining.

"Rich is when you're not in the water," I said.

That sounded harsh, but it was true. And truth isn't pretty here, it's just useful.

I took a step closer so they could see my beard, my scars, my breath. "I have enough scars to know," I said quietly, "that any plan that smells of 'taking' ends up tasting only of 'dying.'"

They swallowed. Not convinced. Just cautiously. Caution is sometimes enough to get through the night.

"Back," I said.

One left first, as if ashamed to be there at all. The brave one stayed a heartbeat longer. He didn't want to be the first to leave. Pride is a foolish muscle. Then he did leave, slowly, and his gaze told me: This isn't over.

When they were gone, Tom stayed standing next to me. "You let them go," he said.

“Yes,” I said.

Tom snorted. "They'll be back."

“Yes,” I said.

"Then I'll cut it next time," said Tom.

"Maybe," I said.

Tom looked at me. "You don't want it," he said.

"I don't want the ship to burn," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Ships burn anyway."

The woman emerged from the darkness as if she had overheard the conversation. Perhaps she had. She hears everything that matters. "They're using names," she said softly.

“Yes,” I said.

"Yours," she said.

I nodded.

“And Briggs,” she said.

I nodded again.

"Then the moment will come soon," she said.

"Which one?" I asked, even though I already knew.

"The moment you stop just counting scars," she said. "But start making them."

I felt my arm pull, the old scar, as if it were agreeing. Scars aren't just the past. They're also a prediction.

I went downstairs to Keene again. Not to threaten him. To see if he was asleep. Keene wasn't asleep. Keene only lies still so you'll think he's asleep.

"You're talking about Briggs," I said.

Keene blinked slowly. "Of course," he whispered. "Briggs is the knot. Knots make hands nervous."

"They're talking about me," I said.

Keene grinned. "You are the beard," he whispered. "Beard is easy to grasp."

"You'll do it," I said.

Keene shook his head slightly. "I'm just the mirror," he whispered. "You're the face."

I went back upstairs because otherwise I would have taken his breath away, and then he would have won. He wants me to make him a martyr. Martyrs are the cheapest form of power.

Up above, the night was quieter again, but not peaceful. Rather, tense. The ship was underway, the flag was fluttering, the gold lay heavy in its hold, and somewhere inside the men lay a plan like a knife, already half-drawn.

I counted scars instead of years.

And tonight I knew: The next scar will not come from the sea.

It will come from men.

From men who believe they have a right to more.

And if they come, I won't count them.

Then I will take action.

The last honest fight

The last honest fight never begins with drums. It begins with a glance that lingers too long. With footsteps that are too quiet. With a knife that isn't drawn, but warms in thought.

I sensed it before anyone even opened their mouth. That thin, dry air in which men suddenly become polite. Politeness is always a bad sign here. Polite means: I don't want to warn you, I want to catch you.

The night was gone, but morning hadn't quite arrived yet. A gray in-between, where everything smelled of cold sweat. The ship ran smoothly, almost gently, as if it were mocking us: Look how peaceful everything is, while inside you're already scratching your throats raw.

The tar-faced boy hung from the mast, and when you walked past him, you felt like you were walking past your own stupidity. The other two hung beside him, like footnotes to a story no one wants to read. Briggs was at the helm, his back straight as if carved from wood. Tom was somewhere in the shadows, as always. The woman was there, without being there. And Keene... Keene was sitting below, probably already grinning, even though he couldn't see it. Keene senses things like that. The bastard smells blood before it's spilled.

I went for my walk, not out of a sense of duty, but because otherwise I'd go crazy. Standing still is like a chair collapsing beneath you. So you walk. You walk until your feet hurt and your mind goes quiet.

Two men were standing too close together at the bow. I knew them. Not well. But well enough. One with those honest fists that hadn't done anything honest in a long time. The other with a look that always pretended he had everything under control, even though he couldn't even control his own hunger. They saw me coming and pretended to be talking about the wind.

The wind. Yes. Of course.

"Tomorrow," said the one with the fists.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"Beautiful day," said the other.

"Beautiful is for the countryside," I said.

He grinned briefly, too dapper for this deck. "You sound like the woman," he murmured.

"The woman sounds like the truth," I said.

They exchanged a glance. And in that glance lay precisely what I didn't want: a plan already in motion. It wasn't a grand plan. Not some "we'll take over the ship and sing." More like a dirty plan that says: We'll take what we need, and if someone's in the way, well, they'll fall.

"Briggs never sleeps, does he?" asked the man with the fists, seemingly casually.

"Briggs sleeps when you're dead," I said.

The other one laughed softly. A bad laugh. "And you?" he asked. "Are you asleep?"

I looked at him. "I sleep when I can afford to."

"Can you afford it?" he asked.

There it was. The bait. A sentence that looked like interest but tasted like a threat.

"What are you getting at?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing," he said. "Just... we're tired. And we're hungry."

"Then eat soup," I said.

He huffed and puffed with his fists. "Soup is not included," he muttered.

"Share," I said. "There it is again."

The other took a half step closer. Not aggressively. More like confidentially. "You're not blind," he said quietly. "Briggs is holding onto everything. The gold, the direction, our throats."

"Briggs is holding the ship," I said.

"And who holds Briggs?" he asked.

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch. The laughter wanted to escape. Judgment. But I held it back. Too much judgment, and you're no longer a person, but just a sound to be covered from.

"What do you want?" I asked again. More calmly this time.

He glanced briefly up at the flag, then back at me. "We want a solution," he said.

"With you, solutions always smell like theft," I said.

The one with the fists turned red. "We bled!" he snarled. "For the gold! For that damned flag! For you!"

"You're bleeding for yourself," I said. "Not for me."

The other man raised his hand, as if trying to calm the angry man. "Nobody wants you," he said quickly. "You are... you are useful."

Useful. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. That was the kind of compliment that says: We might kill you later, but not today.

"I am not your tool," I said.

"On a ship, everyone is a tool," said the other.

"Then be careful that you don't become the hammer that hits itself on the fingers," I said.

He grinned thinly. "You're good with words," he said.

"Words are cheaper than blood," I said.

"But blood works better," said the man with the fists.

There it was again, that phrase men always say right before they prove it. I saw his hands. Large hands. Calluses. And I saw that he wasn't just carrying hands today. I saw the slight movement at his belt. A knife. Of course. Always a knife.

I took a step back, not out of fear, but to make space. Space is life.

"Get to work," I said.

The other shook his head. "Work won't free us from the curse," he said.

"You are a curse," I said.

His grin vanished. For a moment I saw something real in his face: that wounded vanity that says, how can you see me like this? Then the mask reappeared. "Then I guess it's about time someone broke the curse," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

He didn't look at the crates. He didn't look at the mast. He looked aft, where Briggs was standing, like a damned post. And that's when I knew: It's starting. Maybe not with knives now, but in my head. And when it starts in your head, at sea it's only a matter of minutes before blood drips onto wood.

I turned away, walked slowly, as if nothing had happened. I didn't want the two of them to realize they'd hit me. You give them no triumph. No triumph, no warmth, no hope.

I went over to Briggs, stood next to him without warning. "Two up ahead," I said quietly.

Briggs' gaze remained straight ahead. "I know," he said.

Of course he knew. Briggs knows everything. That's his talent and his problem.

"They want you," I said.

"They want the gold," Briggs said. "I'm just the lid."

"And me?" I asked.

Briggs' mouth barely twitched. "You're the knife they can't control," he said.

I spat. "I am not a knife."

"Then they will make you one," Briggs said.

We were silent for a moment. The ship was moving. The flag cracked once. Down below, deep, I heard a dull thud. Maybe the boy. Maybe a barrel. Maybe Keene banging against some wood somewhere, so someone would think: There's something there. Keene even makes noises about weapons.

"What is your plan?" I asked.

Briggs responded immediately. "No plan," he said. "Just a moment."

"Which moment?" I asked.

Briggs turned his head toward me. His eyes were calm. Too calm. "The moment they think they have the majority," he said. "That's when they come."

"And then?" I asked.

"Then they lose," said Briggs.

So cold. So simple. But I realized: Briggs doesn't want to avoid it. Briggs wants to end it. Like a disease you don't treat with herbs, but with a knife.

Tom arrived, as always, just when you need him or fear him. "I heard them too," he murmured. "They're gathering."

"How many?" I asked.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Enough to make it fun," he said.

"Just kidding," I growled.

Tom shrugged. "Fun is another word for: I'm still alive."

The woman suddenly stood there, quiet, her eyes on the men at the bow. "If it happens," she said, "then let it happen openly. No poison. No night knives. No playing hide-and-seek."

Briggs nodded slightly. "Yes," he said.

I looked at her. "Really?" I asked.

She nodded. "The last honest fight," she said softly. "So that it can be quiet again afterwards."

Quiet. The word sounded like a dream. And I knew: quiet doesn't exist here. Not really. But maybe it's less loud.

I glanced over at the bow. The two men were no longer alone. There were three. Four. One more had joined them, a man I'd seen for days, his gaze fixed on the crates. A man who always pretends to just breathe. Now he was breathing like a man about to jump.

"They're coming," said Tom.

I slowly inhaled. Salt. Wood. Fear. And somewhere beneath it: that stupid, cold gleam that turns men into monsters.

I put my hand to my belt, felt the grip. Not because I felt like being a hero. Because I knew: If you're empty in a moment like that, you're not moral. You're dead.

Briggs stayed at the wheel. Tom shifted his weight, ready like a dog about to pounce. The woman remained silent, as if she wanted to hear the end of a story.

And me? I felt my scars tugging, as if they were counting. Not years. Seconds. One... two... three...

The last honest fight was no legend.

He was simply the moment when no one could pretend anymore that it was all just talk.

They didn't come like a wave. They came like an illness. First a cough, then another, then you realize you already have a fever.

Four men detached themselves from the bow, pretending they were just checking the rope, reading the wind, some kind of nautical nonsense you need to be able to look yourself in the eye. Then there were six. Then eight. And suddenly "coincidence" is no longer believable, even if you want to convince yourself otherwise.

I wasn't in the way. I was standing in such a way that I could be in the way. That's the difference between courage and survival. Courage stands and waits to be hit. Survival stands and ensures that the blow misses.

The one with the fists was in front, of course. He looked like a man who had long since disliked his own life and now wanted to blame someone else. Next to him was the one with the narrow grin, who believed words were a ladder. And behind them were the others, the hungry eyes, the silent ones, who perhaps didn't even want to kill, but were happy to be there when it happened, so they could later say: I was there.

Briggs stayed at the helm. No movement, no looking back, nothing. As if it were all just wind turning. That made the men even angrier. Anger needs a response. If you don't give them that response, they have to get louder so they can feel themselves.

"Briggs!" shouted the man with his fists.

Briggs did not reply.

The man took a few steps closer. The group followed. Wood creaked. A few sailors on the side pretended to work, but their hands were slow, their eyes quick.

"Briggs!" the man shouted again, this time louder.

Briggs turned around slowly. Not startled. Not angry. Just that look that says: Ah, it's you. "What?" he asked.

A few men muttered. The "What" sounded like a slap.

The one with the narrow grin stepped forward. He raised his hands as if bringing peace. Peace on a ship is always a knife with a loop. "We want to talk," he said.

"You've been talking for days," said Briggs. "Now do some work."

That was the moment you could hear something inside them tear. Not the rope. The last vestige of patience.

"You're holding everything back," said the grinning man. "The gold. The course. Our lives."

"I'm keeping you alive," Briggs said.

"You're keeping us on a leash," he spat, shoving his fists in his face.

Briggs nodded. "Yes," he said. "And you still bite."

Tom was standing somewhere behind me; I felt him like a blade against my back. The woman was to the side, silent. And I realized: everyone is waiting for the first real step. The one step that turns words into blood.

The grinning man inhaled sharply. He wanted to say something that would grab the others. A sentence that would sound like justice but in reality taste like theft. "We demand," he began.

"You're not demanding anything," said Briggs.

The man paused. He smiled again, thinly. "We are the team," he said.

"You are eight men," Briggs said. "A team is more than that."

A few heads turned, trying to figure out who was on which side. That's the ugly part: as soon as someone says "we," everyone starts counting themselves. And everyone counts differently.

"He's dead because of you," someone suddenly shouted from the back, and I didn't even know who he meant. The one who went overboard? The one who got hit by the rope? Or simply everyone who will eventually die because they're standing here? On a ship like this, "he" is always a placeholder.

"He's dead because he was stupid," said Briggs.

"You're cold!" someone shouted.

"Cold weather keeps you warm," said Briggs.

This sentence was like oil. It may have been true, but truth can ignite a fire when people prefer lies.

The one with the fists moved even closer. His hand went to his belt. Not quite to the knife, but close enough for me to see it. I moved the slightest. Imperceptibly. Just ready.

"Give us our gold," the man said.

There it was. Finally. No more "talking." No more "justice." Gold.

Briggs looked at him. "Your gold," said Briggs.

"Yes," said the man.

Briggs nodded slowly, as if listening to the man like a child. "If I give it to you," Briggs said, "you'll kill each other over it."

"No," the man said immediately, too quickly.

Briggs raised an eyebrow. "You're even lying to yourself," Briggs said.

A murmur went through the group. One of those at the back glanced briefly to the side, as if already considering how he could be faster than the person next to him later.

The man with the grin noticed. He immediately intervened. "We'll share it fairly," he said. "Under supervision. Order."

Order. The word was so ridiculous it hurt. Men on the verge of slitting each other's throats talk about order like it's a clean shirt.

"Order," Briggs repeated.

"Yes," said the man.

Briggs' gaze swept over the group. He saw every hand, every bag, every twitch. He probably even saw the lie in their teeth. Then he said, "If you want order, line up. One by one. And tell me why I should trust you."

Silence.

The eight men looked at each other. Lines are dangerous. Lines show who stands at the front and who at the back. Lines turn "we" back into "I".

"Stop your game," he snarled with his fists.

"This is not a game," Briggs said. "This is survival."

The man raised his voice, realizing that Briggs was tearing him apart without touching him. "You have no power anymore," he shouted. "Not over us."

There it was. The sentence.

And that was the moment Briggs was talking about. The moment when they think they have the majority. You could see it: One of the eight shifted his foot as if he was about to jump. Another reached into his pocket. A third swallowed so hard his throat crunched.

I heard Tom exhale softly behind me. He was ready to turn the air into a knife.

Briggs said calmly, "Then take them."

It was as if he had opened a door.

The one who jumped with his fists.

Not elegant. Not heroic. Just forward, like a bull that knows only one direction. His hand went to the knife. He drew it halfway. Sometimes halfway is enough.

I moved.

Not with a quip. Not with a laugh. I stepped in sideways, taking away his angle. My forearm met his arm, not hard, but precisely. The knife slipped, didn't fall, but suddenly it was no longer pointing forward, but somewhere where it wouldn't help anyone.

He cursed, tried to knock me over with his shoulder. I moved with him, let him pass, and gave him a quick nudge in the side with my knee. Not to kill. To break his rhythm. If you steal a man's rhythm, you steal his courage.

He staggered.

Tom was there, like a shadow finally fulfilling its purpose. Tom grabbed the man by the wrist, twisted, and you heard that small, ugly crack. Not a major break, just a reminder: your body is not infinite.

The man screamed.

And that scream was the starting signal for the others. Not all of them. Two jumped forward, one actually drew his knife, another grabbed a rope like a club. The one with the grin lingered a fraction too long, thinking he could still talk. Orators are often the first to die when the talking is over.

Things got tight. The deck is small. Fear makes it feel smaller.

I felt a blow to my back, not deep, but hot. A blade grazed me. My skin burned, and in that burning sensation was that old, familiar calculation: There it is, the next number.

I turned around and saw the man with the rope. He drew back his arm again. I stepped in, grabbed the rope, pulled it towards me, and his body followed, because people are dumber than things. My head hit his forehead. There was a crack. He went down, his gaze blank, as if someone had ripped the story out of his mind.

Briggs moved now. One step. Just one step, but it was enough to change the room. Briggs didn't reach for a knife. Briggs reached for a weight. He kicked the ankle of a man who was about to attack Tom. The man fell, hard, and before he even knew which way was up, a boot was on his wrist. Knife clanged away.

The woman was in between, quick, quiet. She wasn't cutting wildly. She was cutting deliberately, in tendons, in pockets, in illusions. One of them suddenly held his arm and looked confused, because he hadn't realized that blood is so warm.

And yet it wasn't a massacre. Not yet. It was this raw, brief fight where you sensed: They wanted power, but they didn't want to pay the price. That's the unfair part: Most want the gold, but not the bill.

The one with the grin finally tried to save his mouth. "Stop!" he shouted. "Stop!"

Tom turned his head toward him and grinned, so crookedly, so coldly, that it briefly made my stomach churn. "You say stop when it starts?" Tom asked quietly. "You really are a poet."

The man swallowed. His eyes jumped to me, then to Briggs. He was searching for some way out, some sentence that would talk him back to life.

Briggs said, "Tie them up."

A few of the loyalists finally sprang into action, as if they had been waiting for this word to tell them which side they were allowed to be on. Ropes were fetched. Hands gripped. Knots were tied. And suddenly, the eight were no longer eight. They were individual bodies, breathing and realizing: The fight was honest, yes. But honest doesn't mean fair. Honest simply means: Now, what counts is who was prepared.

The one with the fists was on his knees, his hand twisted, the knife gone. He was spitting blood and staring at me with that hatred that was no longer heroic, but merely despicable. "You," he gasped.

"I," I said.

"You betrayed us," he spat.

"I stopped you," I said.

He laughed briefly, a broken laugh. "You count scars," he gasped. "Today you'll get one."

I touched my back. Warm. Sticky. Nothing serious. But there it was. A new number.

"I already have them," I said.

And while the bound men groaned and the crew around them breathed as if after a storm, I realized: This wasn't the end. This was only the end of talk. The fight was honest because no one had poisoned the rum, no one had shoved a knife down a throat in the dead of night. They had come, openly, and we had thrown them back, openly.

But being honest also means: there are no more excuses.

Now there are winners and losers.

And at sea, a loser is often just a future dead man who doesn't yet know when he will fall.

When it was over, there was no silence. That's a lie people like to tell: the fight ends, and then there's peace. Bullshit. After a fight, there's only breath. Heavy breath. The breath of men who've just realized they're not made of courage, but of flesh. And flesh is always just one dangerous step away from blood.

The eight of them lay, knelt, or hung somewhere from ropes, and suddenly they were no longer a group. No longer a "team." No longer a "movement." They were once again what everyone here ultimately is: an individual. Individual and naked in their minds, even if they were still wearing trousers.

The man with the fists spat blood and still wanted to appear powerful. That's the sad thing about some men: they cling to their pride like a mast in a storm, even though the mast is already ablaze. Tom had twisted his wrist so badly that he'll never be able to grip properly again without thinking about it. That was a good punishment. Not instantly dead, not instantly free. A memory that accompanies him with every task.

Briggs walked slowly past them all, looking at them as if they were in a box and he had to decide which ones were still usable. Briggs's look wasn't cruel. It was practical. And sometimes practicality is the most inhumane thing there is.

"Which one of you started this?" Briggs asked.

No one answered. Of course not. The culprit is something men like to pass around, like an empty cup. Everyone pretends they've only taken a quick sip.

Briggs stopped beside the grinning man. The orator. The ladder builder. The one who thought words could save him. He had a cut on his forearm, not deep, but enough that he kept looking at it, as if checking to see if his blood really belonged to him.

"You," said Briggs.

The man swallowed. "We... we just wanted—"

"You wanted to," said Briggs.

The man glanced briefly at the others, seeking support. Support is a precious commodity these days. No one gave it to him.

"Say it," Briggs said calmly.

The man pressed his lips together. Then it came out, quietly, like a fart in a church: "I wanted to be fair."

Tom laughed dryly. A single sound. The kind of sound that insults you without shouting at you.

Briggs nodded. "Fair," Briggs repeated. "You wanted fair. And you pulled a knife."

"He was the first—" the man began, pointing somewhere, maybe at me, maybe at Tom, maybe at the air.

"Nobody draws first," Briggs said. "Nobody just draws like that. You've been drawing this in your heads for days."

The man was breathing heavily. "You're keeping us on a tight leash," he said, now braver again because he realized he was already at rock bottom. "You're keeping everything on a tight leash. You're holding us by the throat."

"Yes," said Briggs. "And now I'm holding you."

Briggs turned to the loyalists. "Bind them properly," he said. "Not so they die. So they learn."

Learning. This word is never friendly here. Learning means: pain with meaning. And meaning is rare.

The men were brought to the mast, one by one. Not all eight on the same mast—that would be another "we." Briggs didn't want a "we." He wanted individual mistakes. So he distributed them. One at the front, one at the back, two at the railing, one at the bottom of the companionway, so that everyone passing by would see this face: This is how your plan ends.

The boy with the tar in his mouth was still hanging there, and when they brought the newly bound prisoners near him, he blinked. There was something in his eyes like: Welcome. Not out of schadenfreude. Out of that bitter camaraderie of the humiliated. On a ship, shame is sometimes the only family.

I went to the railing and touched my back. The cut wasn't deep, but it burned as if someone had forced salt into it. I pulled my shirt away a little, felt the warm wetness. A line. A new number. I exhaled and almost laughed because it was so damn fitting: the last honest fight and I'm walking out with a souvenir, like I'd stumbled into a pub.

The woman came next to me, didn't look at the wound, but at my face. She recognizes things better in faces than in blood.

"You got it," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Not deep," she said.

"Deep enough to annoy me," I said.

She nodded. "That's good," she said. "Remember things that are annoying."

"I have enough memories," I said.

"Not today," she said. "Otherwise you'll get weak later."

Soft. That word again. Tom uses it like an insult. She uses it like a warning.

Tom joined them, wiping his hands as if he'd just gutted a fish. His eyes were still glistening slightly. Not with joy. With being awake.

"That was decent," said Tom.

"Things are rarely tidy on such a shitty boat," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Yeah, but today it was almost like..." He searched for the word, as if embarrassed. "...honestly."

"Honesty hurts," I said.

Tom nodded. "That's why I like it."

Briggs called us. Not a roar. Just that tone that says: Come here before I have you taken away.

We stood beside him, and Briggs looked ahead again, as if the sea were the only thing that mattered. Maybe it was.

"You are bound," I said.

"Yes," said Briggs.

"What do you do with them?" asked Tom, too interested.

Briggs' voice remained calm. "I'm doing what they hate most," he said.

Tom grimaced. "Work?" he asked.

Briggs nodded. "Work," said Briggs. "And hunger."

I sensed a few men nearby unconsciously moving closer to listen. Hunger is a word you always take seriously at sea.

"They won't get any rum," Briggs continued. "They'll get water and bread. And they'll get ropes, cables, scrubs. They'll clean up what they wanted to make dirty."

Tom spat. "Too soft," he muttered.

Briggs glanced at Tom. "The soft thing to do would be to set them free," Briggs said. "The hard thing to do is to let them live and make them feel every day how stupid they were."

That was Briggs. Not a swift execution. Not a grand drama. A punishment that holds the ship together because it has time. Time is Briggs' knife.

"And what if they try again?" I asked.

Briggs barely shrugged. "Then there will be less," he said.

"Less what?" asked Tom.

Briggs looked ahead again. "Fewer men," he said.

No pathos. Just mathematics. And I noticed how the team swallowed that, even those who had just been on the wrong side. Because they understood: The fight was honest, yes. But what comes after won't be pleasant. What comes after will only be consistent.

Later, when the sun was higher and the wind became more steady, came that dull moment when the ship wonders whether to continue. The men went to work, but their movements were different. More cautious. Some looked at me, some looked away. Some regarded Briggs like a father, others like a gallows. And both are dangerous.

I went downstairs to Keene. I know I should leave it alone. But when you've got a splinter in your flesh, you pick at it, even if it's stupid.

Keene sat there, bound, his smile smaller than usual. Not because he was sad. Because he was thinking. Keene likes to think best when things don't go as planned.

"They have lost," I said.

Keene blinked slowly. "Today," he whispered.

"That's enough for today," I said.

Keene smiled as if I'd just told him a joke. "Today is a small word," he whispered. "Tomorrow is bigger."

"Tomorrow you will still be in these chains," I said.

Keene nodded. "Chains are just time," he whispered.

I stared at him. "You wanted blood," I said.

Keene shrugged, as best he could. "I wanted the truth," he whispered. "And the truth is: men hate boundaries."

"Briggs is a boundary," I said.

Keene grinned. "Exactly," he whispered. "And boundaries will be tested eventually. Always."

I went back upstairs because I noticed my fingers were itching too much. Keene is poison. If you smell it for too long, you suddenly crave violence again, just to finally have some peace of mind.

Up above, the day was now bright, and that made everything almost ridiculous. So much blood, so much fear, so many plans – and then a blue sky, as if the world were saying: I don't care about you.

I stood at the railing again, felt the new wound on my back, and thought: That's it. That's how it is. You fight honestly, you win honestly, and yet something still sticks with you. A cut, a look, a word that lingers.

The last honest fight was over, yes.

But the honest thing about it wasn't the victory.

The honest thing was that we could no longer lie to each other.

We know what we are.

And we know what it costs.

I closed my eyes briefly, breathing in the salt and wood and that quiet, metallic promise in the ship's belly. Then I opened them again.

Because at sea you only have two options: see or sink.

Fear is a useful tool

The day after a battle has such a false sense of cleanliness. The planks are still the same, the sky pretends it saw nothing, and the men move as if everything is back to normal. But in reality, everything is new, only no one says so aloud, because saying so aloud means taking responsibility. And responsibility is heavier than any chest of gold.

I walked across the deck and heard the ship breathing. Wood has lungs too, if you stand on it long enough. It creaks in places where it was still yesterday. Or you only hear it because you now know that silence can break at any moment. The bound men hung scattered like warning signs. One at the front, one at the back, two in between. The boy with the tar in his mouth was still hanging from the mast, his lips black like a damned stamp. When I looked at him, I didn't see him. I saw a message. And messages are more important than people here.

Briggs was at the helm as if he hadn't even noticed the night. The bastard is like a stone you throw into water: it makes ripples, but it remains a stone. Tom was somewhere nearby, too relaxed for someone who had just nearly sliced half a ship to pieces. The woman walked across the deck with a bucket, scrubbing blood as if it were just dirt. Maybe that was it. Maybe it's easier to look at it that way.

I felt the cut on my back again. The bandage was sticking, and every time I turned, it pulled, as if the new scar wanted to join the conversation. I wasn't counting them. Not yet. Today I was more preoccupied with counting how many eyes were looking at me and how many of them thought I was a problem tonight. Or a solution. Or both.

Fear isn't just hanging in the wind. Fear is in glances. In averted minds. In men who are suddenly very industrious because diligence looks like innocence. And the interesting thing is: most aren't afraid of the sea. They respect the sea, yes, but it's so vast that it's almost abstract. They're afraid of each other. Of the knife that comes unannounced. Of the judgment that no longer laughs.

I stopped by the crates. Not because I loved them, but because they drew me in like a bad thought. Cover them up, as if you could simply cover a problem with fabric. Two men stood guard, their eyes too alert for the hour. One looked at me and immediately swallowed hard, as if he'd just thought of something that would send him flying.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He blinked. "J... Jory," he said.

“Jory,” I repeated. I let the name hang for a moment. Names are important. Names are like handles. If you grab a man by his name, he feels seen. And for some, being seen is worse than being beaten.

"You were watching yesterday," I said.

“Yes,” said Jory.

"What did you learn?" I asked.

He swallowed again. “That... that Briggs—”

“Not Briggs,” I said. “You.”

He looked at me as if I had just stripped him naked. "That... that I—" He searched for a sentence that didn't sound like cowardice. "That I have to be careful."

"Wrong," I said.

His face went blank.

"You have reason to be afraid," I said calmly.

The second guard grimaced, as if he didn't like the word. Fear is embarrassing for men. Men act as if fear is something only women experience. And then they die because they believe it.

"Fear makes you weak," murmured the second one.

I looked at him. "Fear makes you awake," I said. "Weakness makes you proud."

He wanted to object, but no sentence came out that didn't sound stupid. So he remained silent.

I tapped my ankles against the tarpaulin. "That stuff in there," I said, "is metal. Nothing more. But it'll make you sick."

Jory nodded, too quickly.

“If you are not afraid of the metal,” I said, “you are not afraid of yourselves. And then you are dead.”

That wasn't a sermon. That was an instruction manual. Fear is a tool. You can cut yourself with it, yes. But you can also work with it, as long as you're not completely drunk in the head.

I walked on, leaving them standing there, and noticed how their attitude changed. Not because they loved me. Because they suddenly didn't trust themselves anymore. That sounds harsh, but it's the truth: A team only holds together if every man knows he has limits. If every man believes he has no limits, you'll soon have nothing but isolated animals with knives.

Briggs called me over to the helm for a moment. No drama, just a glance and a nod. I stood beside him, looked ahead. Water. Nothing. And yet, there was this feeling that someone, somewhere, could smell us.

"They are quieter," I said.

Briggs barely nodded. "Quiet is good," he said.

"Being quiet is also dangerous," I said.

"Yes," said Briggs. "But dangerous is normal."

He was silent for a moment and then said, "You're talking a lot today."

"Because they think today," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained fixed on the horizon. "They're always thinking," he said. "Yesterday they only believed they had the right to act."

"And now?" I asked.

Briggs' mouth twitched. "Now they're scared," he said.

I nodded. "Fear is a useful tool," I said.

Briggs glanced at me briefly. "You've finally figured it out," he said.

I spat. "I always understood it," I said. "I just didn't like it."

Briggs' gaze returned to the straight ahead. "Like is a luxury," he said.

He was right about that. Liking is for people who know soft beds. We knew edges. Edges don't like you. Edges take you away.

Later, as the day progressed, I noticed the fear changing its form. At first, it had been the fear of punishment. Now it was the fear of the unknown. No longer: What will Briggs do to me? But: What happens next? And that fear is the kind you can play with if you're a bastard who wants order.

I went over to Tom. Tom wasn't sitting, he was leaning back, because Tom always acts like he's about to jump at any moment. "You're too relaxed," I said.

Tom grinned. "Relaxed is just a face," he said. "Inside, I'm always ready."

"Ready for what?" I asked.

"For the next idiot," said Tom.

I nodded. "You like fear," I said.

Tom grimaced, as if he were wondering whether that was an insult. "I like truth," he said. "And fear brings out the truth. When they're afraid, they show who they are."

"And what if they aren't afraid?" I asked.

Tom grinned crookedly. "Then they're either dead or stupid," he said. "Or both."

I left because Tom won't go any deeper than that unless you cut him open.

The woman stood by the mast, looked at the boy without pity or hatred. She looked at him the way one looks at the weather. "He'll survive," she said softly.

"And then?" I asked.

"Then he becomes dangerous," she said.

"Because he hates?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Because he's learned," she said. "Learning doesn't make you good. Learning makes you effective."

I looked at the boy. His eyes were tired, but there was something more in them now than just shame. There was defiance, too. Defiant is the small flame you'll later use either for cooking or to light your ship.

"Should I break him?" I asked.

The woman looked at me. "It's already broken," she said. "Now you have to decide what to do with the shards."

Shatter. Exactly. A team after a night like that is like glass. It can become windows again. It can also become knives.

I felt that pull on my back again, and I thought: Fear isn't just what you inflict on others. Fear is also what you allow yourself. The fear that you'll make the wrong decision someday. The fear that you'll become too soft and they'll devour you. The fear that you'll become too hard and end up just a beard, the kind they sing about in a song because it was so beautifully cruel.

And deep down, in the belly of the ship, Keene sat waiting for some fear to become too great and tip into hatred. Keene doesn't need knives. Keene only needs a man who lies awake at night thinking: I have a right.

I leaned against the railing and looked out into the water. The water was calm, as if it were asleep. But the sea never sleeps. It only waits. Just like fear.

And I understood: If you don't use fear, it will use you. Then you become its tool. Then you become the hand that trembles when it needs to pull. Then you become the man who betrays himself because he can't bear his heart racing.

Fear is a useful tool.

You can use it to hold a ship together.

Or you can slowly, day by day, unscrew your soul from your ribs until you no longer know if you are still alive or just functioning.

In the evening, a ship becomes a confessional without a priest. Everyone sits somewhere, scratching at themselves, staring into space, trying to organize their thoughts so they don't reek of betrayal. But thoughts stink if you leave them in the dark long enough.

The men spoke more quietly. That was good. Quietly means they're still afraid of something. And fear is malleable. You can mold it into discipline or into madness. Madness is easier, but discipline lasts longer. Briggs wanted discipline. Tom wanted madness with a clean cut. I just wanted to keep the ship from falling apart like a drunken tooth.

I went down into the belly, not because I wanted to see Keene, but because I needed to know if he'd laid his little eggs in our heads again. The descent smelled of damp wood and of what people do when they're scared: sweat, urine, old soup, and that sweet something you can't name because it'll stick in your throat.

Two guards stood in front of Keene, and they stood too straight. Too smartly dressed. That was a bad sign. Men who suddenly dress smartly are playing a role. Playing a role means lying.

"How is the boy?" someone asked quietly as I walked by.

I stopped. "Why are you asking me that?" I asked.

He flinched. "Just because."

"That's always crap," I said. "Say it."

He swallowed. "He... he's hanging up there. And..." He broke off, realizing that he had just asked for mercy without using the word.

"He's alive," I said. "And that's all you need."

The second guard looked away. Looking away is also a question. I left them standing there and went to Keene.

Keene sat there, bound, as if he were a forgotten piece of wood. But his eyes were awake. The eyes of people who never truly sleep, because they work better in the dark.

"You come often," he whispered.

"You are a problem that won't go away," I said.

He smiled small. "Problems are useful," he whispered. "They keep you moving."

"You're keeping us in the dirt," I said.

Keene shrugged as best he could. "Dirt is honest," he whispered. "You can see footprints in dirt."

I stared at him. "You made her talk," I said.

"They speak because they have tongues," Keene whispered. "And because they are afraid."

"Fear is my tool," I said.

Keene grinned. "No," he whispered. "Fear is a knife. You can hold it. But it will also cut you."

I would have liked to bang his head against the wall, just to make his metaphors stop. But I didn't. I didn't because I realized: if I start losing my hand down here, I'll lose everything up top.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Keene blinked slowly. "I want you to be what you are," he whispered. "You love playing at being orderly. But you're just hunger with sails."

"And you?" I asked.

Keene smiled. "I'm just the one who says it out loud," he whispered.

I went back upstairs. Not because I had won. Because otherwise I couldn't have borne to hear him breathing anymore.

Above, the night was black and vast, and the sea looked like a bed you wouldn't want to get into. The wind was capricious, but strong enough to flap the flag as if it were giving every man on board a few slaps. Perhaps that was even a good thing. Slaps keep you awake.

Briggs was at the wheel. He saw me coming, but said nothing. Briggs doesn't speak unless he has to. He lets the world talk and then decides what's rubbish.

"Keene is awake," I said.

Briggs barely nodded. "Keene never sleeps," he said.

"The guards are talking about the boy," I said.

"Let them," said Briggs. "Talking means they still feel something."

"Feelings can tip over," I said.

Briggs glanced briefly at the bound men, hanging in the wind, faces in the darkness that sometimes looked as if they were already dead, even though they were still breathing.

"Everything can tip," Briggs said. "That's why I'm tipping it in one direction."

"You want fear," I said.

Briggs' voice remained calm. "I want respect," he said. "Fear is only the first step towards it."

Tom joined them, with that casual gait that makes it seem as if he hasn't just walked through eight men like he's through wet paper. "Respect is also fear," Tom said, grinning crookedly.

"You tend to confuse the two," I said.

Tom shrugged. "If it works, it doesn't matter what you call it."

That was Tom. Function. No heart, no discussion. Function or death.

The woman stood a short distance away, watching the team like a cat watching a mouse. Not out of hunger. Out of knowledge. "They won't move tonight," she said quietly.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because they saw that it hurts," she said.

"And tomorrow?" asked Tom.

The woman briefly lifted her chin. "It won't hurt any less tomorrow," she said. "But some will think they're smarter."

Smarter. That word is dangerous. Smarter traitors are worse than stupid ones. Stupid people trip over their own knives. Smarter people lay the knife in front of you so you'll step on it.

I walked across the deck again. Not patrolling. Just feeling. Men see you when you walk. And when they see you, they remember. Memory is a tool, too.

I stopped by the mast. The boy was hanging there, the tar around his mouth now cracked, as if he were pulling his face apart. His eyes were open, but no longer pleading. More like empty. Empty is either an end or a beginning.

I bent down close enough that he could feel my breath. "You're still alive," I said.

He made this dull noise, somewhere between gagging and nodding.

"Good," I said. "Staying alive is your first task."

His eyes flickered.

"Second task," I said, "is: Forget the idea that anyone owes you anything."

He stared at me.

"Nobody owes you shit," I said. "Not Briggs. Not me. Not the flag. Not the gold. Not God, if he ever even happens to stray onto a damn deck like this."

A few men nearby heard it. I noticed it from the silence. Silence is an audience.

"If you swallow this," I told the boy, "you can work again someday. And if you work, you can breathe again someday without constantly thinking about your own mistake."

His eyes became moist.

"And if you don't swallow it," I said, "then you'll become important again someday. And up here, being important is usually just a shortcut to the water."

I left him there because more words would have softened him again. Softness isn't compassion. Softness is what breaks you later because you believe you deserve a second chance.

I walked on, and then I saw it: A man stood alone by the barrels, not bound, not conspicuous, but his hands were in his pockets, and his gaze wasn't at the sky, but at the crates. Not greedy like the others. Rather calm. That was dangerous.

I stepped next to him so suddenly that he flinched.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He swallowed. "Nothing."

"Nothing is your favorite hobby," I said. "Call it something else."

He exhaled. "I think," he said.

"What about?" I asked.

He looked at me briefly. Then he said: "That fear is everything now."

There was one man who at least said it out loud.

"Fear is a tool," I said.

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "But tools can also be used against the person holding them."

I looked at him. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Hale," he said.

"Hale," I repeated. "And what do you want?"

He hesitated. And in that hesitation lay more truth than in a hundred speeches. "I want to live," he said.

It was so simple that I almost liked him. Almost.

"Then keep your distance from people who want to be great," I said. "Being great ends at the gallows or in the water."

He nodded slowly. "And you?" he asked.

"I'm already big enough to be hated," I said.

He glanced briefly at my back, as if he had felt the cut even though he couldn't see it. "You're carrying it," he murmured.

"I'll wear anything," I said. "Because nobody else wants to."

He swallowed and left. And I knew: This guy isn't the one who'll strike tonight. This guy is the one who'll still be standing tomorrow, remembering how you spoke. Men like that are dangerous when they decide you're in their way.

I stopped at the stern and looked into the water. The ship left a trail, and the trail was like a lie: as if you could see where you came from. The sea wipes everything away. Always. It doesn't forget out of forgiveness. It forgets because it doesn't consider you important.

Fear is a useful tool.

But it's also a mirror. And if you stare into that mirror long enough, you no longer see what you're afraid of. You only see who you've become since you started using it. And I realized how I myself had changed. Not heroic. Not better. Just... more efficient. Like a man who's learned that every feeling is either a tool or a weakness that opens your throat at night.

I exhaled, heard the flag snap, heard a bound man groan somewhere, heard the wood creak, heard the sea wait. And I thought: If fear is my tool, then I must be careful not to become its grasp. That I don't become the man everyone touches simply because they want to know what power feels like.

And deep down, in his belly, Keene was probably sitting there smiling.

Because he knows: tools rust.

And when they rust, they break exactly when you need them most.

Just before dawn, fear is at its purest. Not the grand, cinematic fear with violins and screams, but that small, quiet fear that makes your mouth dry and your hands cold. This fear doesn't tell you: You're going to die. It says: You could die if you're stupid now. And that's precisely why it's useful. It keeps you from eating your own teeth.

The crew lay scattered like debris after a storm. Some dozed upright, too afraid to truly sleep. Others simply stared into the darkness, as if expecting an answer there. The bound were silent, not out of insight, but because ropes are more convincing than morality. The boy hung from the mast, his tar-covered mouth cracked, breathing like someone fighting for every breath. Such breathing either makes you soft or hard. Most of the time, it makes you both, just on different days.

I stood at the stern, listening to the ship. Wood, water, wind. And beneath it all, this new sound, the one no one makes out loud, but everyone knows: the fear of being in the wrong place again when the guns go off. Not the fear of cannons. The fear of stares. Of brigs. Of myself. Of what you've already planned inside and can't take back.

Tom came to me, smelling of night and blood, as if he had inhaled both. "You're quiet," he murmured.

"Quiet is not peace," I said.

Tom grinned crookedly. "It's also calm: they're licking their wounds."

"Licking wounds means they still have their tongue," I said. "A tongue causes trouble."

Tom spat. "Then I'll cut their tongues out."

"You're always cutting," I said.

"Because it works," said Tom.

I looked at him. "It works until it burns," I said.

Tom raised an eyebrow. "You're afraid of fire?"

"I'm afraid of idiots with fire," I said.

He laughed softly. And in that laugh lay the truth: We weren't afraid of the sea. We were afraid of ourselves.

Briggs stood at the helm, motionless, as if he were the mast itself. I went to him. Not as a subordinate. More as a man who knows that two knives on the same belt are sometimes better than one.

"They are not asleep," I said.

Briggs barely nodded. "Good," he said.

"Good?" I asked.

"Sleep makes you soft," said Briggs. "Today we need to be tough."

"Being tough isn't enough," I said. "Being tough will eventually make them stubborn."

Briggs glanced at me briefly. "So?" he said.

"Being stubborn is the first step to being stupid," I said.

Briggs was silent for a moment, then he said: "Then give them a second step."

I grinned dryly. "You want me to scare her."

"I want them to work," Briggs said. "Scare is just the lever."

Levers. Tools. All the same language. No god, no honor, no beautiful words. Just mechanics.

I walked across the deck and shouted, not loudly, but in a way that cut through the air:
"Everyone up!"

Heads turned. Some too quickly. Some too slowly. Too slowly means: you don't want to react. And if you don't want to react, you'll react differently eventually.

"All of them," I repeated.

The men crawled out of their corners, stood up, rubbed their eyes, and pretended to be merely tired. Tiredness is sometimes a mask for guilt. Some still had blood on their ankles. Some had sweat of fear under their armpits, even though it was cold.

I didn't line them up. Lines are for parades. I arranged them in a semicircle so that everyone could see everyone else. That's important: fear works better when it has witnesses.

"Listen," I said. "Tonight you saw how quickly a 'we' can become an 'I'."

A few looked away.

"The gold is under tarpaulins," I said. "But it's not just there. It's in your eyes. And that's the problem."

One of them muttered: "We just want our share."

I didn't point at him. I didn't name him. Names make martyrs. I only said, "Part of what? Of a grave?"

A few people laughed nervously. Good. Nervous laughter is fear trying to get out.

"You're afraid of Briggs," I said.

A few heads jerked.

"You are afraid of me," I said.

Even more twitching.

"And you are afraid of each other," I said. "That is the only fear that keeps you alive."

One of them spat. "Fear turns us into dogs."

I nodded. "Yes," I said. "And dogs outlive heroes."

The word "hero" had an effect on them. Some became angry because they secretly liked to see themselves that way. Others fell silent because they knew heroes die beautiful deaths, but they die nonetheless.

I took a few steps forward so they could see my beard and scars. "Let me tell you how it is," I said. "Fear is a tool. If you don't use it, it uses you. Then you make plans at night that will leave you stranded in the morning."

I left the pause as a hook.

Then I said, "And now comes the part that you're really interested in."

A few eyes immediately perked up. Of course. Whenever you say, "Now comes the interesting part," they think of rum or gold, or permission to finally be filthy again.

"The crown is out there again," I said.

That wasn't a lie. Perhaps she wasn't directly visible, but she was out there, somewhere. And even if she wasn't today: the mere thought of it is enough. Fear is a tool, yes. And imagination is the handle.

A murmur went through the semicircle. One said quietly, "You saw her?"

"I smelled her," I said.

Tom grinned in the background because he knows how sometimes smell is more effective than evidence.

"If the Crown gets us," I said, "you'll be hanging from the gallows and shitting your pants before you're dead. And believe me, they won't kill you like pirates. They'll kill you like examples."

Examples. That word hit home. Because everyone here knows how powerful examples are.

"So if you think you need to be big again tonight," I continued, "at least be smart about it. Being big doesn't mean eating Briggs. Being big means keeping your mouth shut and working until the wind forgets you."

A few nodded. A few hated me for being right.

I pointed to the mast. "That boy wanted to belong," I said. "He tried it in the stupidest way possible. Now he wears it on his face. That's his lesson."

The boy made that dull thud. Not a word. Just existence.

"And those," I said, nodding at the bound men, "wanted a shortcut. Shortcuts here usually end at the railing."

A man asked, "What do you want from us?"

That was a good question. Not rebellious. Practical. Practical men are rarer than gold.

"I want you to use fear correctly," I said. "Not against Briggs. Not against me. Against your own stupid thoughts."

A few grinned, thinking it was a joke. But it wasn't.

"Tonight," I said, "no one will stand watch alone. Always in pairs. One watches the sea. One watches the crew. If you only watch the sea, man will devour you. If you only watch man, the sea will devour you."

I saw Briggs give a slight nod in the background. Not praise. Just agreement.

"And one more thing," I said. "Anyone who thinks they have to feed Keene down there, talk to him, listen to him, bring him anything... they might as well jump in the water themselves. Saves us work."

A cold shudder ran through the group. Keene was a name that lay like dirt in the mouth. No one wanted to say it, but everyone tasted it.

One said: "He is just a prisoner."

I smiled. Not nicely. "Prisoners are sometimes freer than you," I said. "Because they don't have to play a role. They can just be poison."

That made her quieter.

Then something happened that I liked: One of the men stepped forward, only half a step, and said: "I was scared yesterday."

He didn't say it proudly, nor whining. Simply. A confession as dry as bread.

I nodded. "Good," I said. "Keep them. And keep your knife away from your comrades."

Another muttered: "Fear sucks."

"Yes," I said. "And yet, it's often the only thing standing between you and the water."

I let them go their separate ways. No long speech. No sermon. If you talk for too long, even truth becomes theater.

Later, when the day was finally truly bright, I noticed how the fear had changed. It wasn't gone. It was just organized. And sometimes, order is all you need here.

I went back to the boxes. Jory was standing there, and his eyes were different. Not braver. Clearer.

"You understand?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "I'm scared."

"Good," I said. "Then you won't steal today."

He swallowed. "I don't want to die," he said.

"Then use the tool," I said.

I walked away, feeling the cut on my back pull. The new number was there, warm, alive. And I thought: Maybe that's the joke of it all. You use fear like a hammer to build order, and in the end, you still end up hitting yourself. Not because you're stupid. Because you're human.

And people... people always have this damn ability to ruin themselves, even when they know exactly how it will end.

The sea wanted to keep me.

The sea has no morals. It has no god, no honor, no damned rules except one: You are a guest, and guests can be thrown out at any time. And when it throws you out, it doesn't make a fuss. No judgment, no farewell, no "but you were so famous." It takes you like a splinter from your skin and carries on as if you had never been there.

After all the drama with the men, the talk of sharing and fairness, and that ridiculous "we" that always pops up when someone doesn't want to take the fall for their own mess, you'd think the day might grant us a break. But breaks are a fairy tale, told only by landlubbers to keep themselves from going crazy. At sea, after the knife, there's no peace, but rather the next blow—and sometimes the blow doesn't come from people. Sometimes it comes from the big, black thing beneath you, patiently waiting until you're just a little too tired to see properly.

The wind was friendly at first, almost mockingly friendly. It pushed us along as if saying: Well, you didn't kill each other, here's a treat. The men became a little more human again, like dogs that wag their tails even after being kicked, if you throw them something. They worked, they avoided each other, they shot me glances that reeked of respect and hatred, depending on how much stupidity was still in their heads. Briggs stood at the helm and acted as if he were the only adult on the ship, and maybe he was. Tom was quiet, but Tom is never quiet, Tom just waits. The woman looked as if she had already seen three hundred such days and knew: The next one will be worse.

I walked across the deck, checking the watches, faces, hands. I saw Hale again, the calm one, the one who says he wants to live. He was standing by a rope, acting like he was just doing work. But his eyes were alert. Alert means: dangerous or useful. Sometimes both. Jory was standing by the crates, and he had that look I like: fear, but clear fear. Not hysterical. Not proud. Just this: I don't want to die. That's the only fear you can really use at sea.

Then came the first thing that smelled like trouble: a change in the light. Not dramatic, just enough to make you suddenly notice how flat the sun looks. How dull. As if it had grown tired of illuminating us. The sky took on this gray film that you can't explain, but your gut tells you immediately: This is about to get nasty.

"The wind is changing direction," one of them said.

"Wind never lies," Tom murmured, and I heard him sound almost satisfied.

Briggs looked up, longer than usual. That was his sign that he meant business. Briggs takes a lot of things seriously, but he takes weather even more seriously, because weather doesn't negotiate. Weather isn't like men. You can break men. Weather breaks you.

The first gusts came at an angle, hard, as if they were in a hurry. Sails snapped, ropes sang, wood groaned. The ship heeled, and the men reflexively grabbed where they knew they could find purchase: ropes, masts, habits. Habit is a better god than the one the captain always invokes.

"Reef!" someone shouted.

Briggs gave short, calm, precise orders. No panic. Panic is the fastest way to the water. The crew reacted, and for a few minutes it looked like we were going to pull it off cleanly. Like a machine. Like a proper ship. Almost laughable, when you know what kind of bastards are breathing out here.

Then came the second wave of wind, stronger, and it hit us like a hand pulling you from your chair. A sail tore in a place that was already old, already tired, and the fabric screamed. Fabric can scream when it dies. It sounded as if our flag above was laughing along.

"Hold on!" shouted Briggs.

Men were struggling. One slipped, just managed to catch himself, and I saw his face turn white for a moment. White is the first sign that someone wants to pray. Praying doesn't help, but it calms the stupid.

The sea grew darker. Not just because of clouds. It grew darker because it was rising up. Waves start as hills. Then they become walls. And when you're standing in front of a wall of water, you quickly realize how small your reputation is, how small your beard is, how small your whole damn legend is.

The first big wave crashed over the railing, washing the deck, tearing away buckets, loose items, almost even a man. He was clinging to a rope, his fingers white, his eyes wide. I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back. No heroic act. Just reflex. When you lose people in the water, you lose order. And order was all we had left.

"Thank you," he gasped.

"Shut up and get to work," I said.

He nodded and worked, because gratitude at sea only makes sense if it immediately puts it into action.

The second wave came faster than you could think. It hit us sideways. The ship groaned, tilted, and for a moment the horizon was wrong. When the horizon is wrong, everything is wrong. Up is down, down is up, and you realize how easy it is to disappear.

A barrel broke free, rolled, and crashed into a crate. Wood splintered. Men cursed. And then I heard that sound that made my stomach clench: a dull cracking from the ship's belly, as if something was giving way that shouldn't.

"Water!" someone shouted from below.

The word cut through everything. Water is normal outside. Inside, it's death.

Briggs didn't shout. Briggs just said, "Pump. Now."

And suddenly it was all work. No politics, no greed, no Keene, no talk. Just pumps. Buckets. Hands. Backs. Sweat.

I ran downstairs. The ship's hull was damp, dark, and stuffy. And there it was: water, forcing its way in like an animal that smells blood. It didn't come like a torrent, more like a stubborn, cold mouth that bites into a crack and says: I'm staying. You won't get me out.

"Where?" I asked.

A man pointed, his eyes wild. "There!"

I knelt down, felt around, and felt cold wetness on my fingers. A leak, small but honest. Little things kill you. Big things you see coming.

"Stuff it!" I shouted.

Cloths were torn, pieces of wood fetched, anything that could be crammed in. You stuff like a madman, because you are one. And as I knelt there, I felt the ship above me take on another wave. Wood creaked. Water lapped. And for a moment I thought: Maybe the sea really does want to keep me. Maybe at some point it gets fed up with my beard, with my judgments, with all my crap, and now it's simply collecting the bill.

I shoved the stuff in so hard my hands burned. The man next to me pumped like a madman, his arms shaking, but he didn't stop. Fear is a tool, yes. And down here it was purer than anywhere else. No fear of Briggs. No fear of me. Just fear of water in a wooden belly.

Upstairs I heard Tom scream, but not in panic. In joy. Tom loves it when the world becomes honest.

"Up!" someone shouted.

I waited another heartbeat, pressed, checked. The water didn't speed up anymore. It was still there, but it was coming more slowly. Slower is life. I stood up, ran upstairs, my heart in my mouth.

There was chaos on deck, but organized chaos. Men on ropes, men at pumps, men with buckets. Briggs at the helm, his eyes like a hammer. The flag lashed as if challenging the sea. And I thought: If the sea wants me today, it's not because of the flag. Not because of gold. It wants me because I've been challenging it for as long as I can remember. Because I've always believed I could take what I want, and maybe now the sea is simply withdrawing.

A wave came, bigger than the others, a real wall. It lifted the ship, and I felt the ground disappear beneath me for a moment. Everything became light. And in that lightness was a single thought, clear as a knife: This is what it feels like to fall without knowing if you'll get back up.

The water broke over us, crashing into my face, salt in my eyes, in my mouth, into my old scars. It burned like mockery. I held on tight, coughing, spitting, cursing. Next to me, someone slipped, his foot gave way, and I grabbed his arm. He hung there for a moment, and I saw that naked look in his eyes: I don't want to. I pulled him up.

"The sea—" he gasped.

"The sea always wants," I snarled. "You just have to decide if you're going to make it easy for it."

He nodded without understanding and continued working, because sometimes work is the only thing you understand when everything else washes away.

And as the wind howled and the ship groaned and the water tried to carve its way through, I realized: Perhaps this is the honestest fight of all. Not against men. Not against the crown. Not against any curse made of fabric. But against this great, indifferent thing that outlives us all.

The sea wanted to keep me.

And I had to show him that I wasn't finished being spat out.

The storm wasn't a single blow, it was a series. Like a drunkard who doesn't just hit you once, but again and again, because he senses you're still standing. And every time you stand, he's insulted. That's how the sea felt: insulted by our survival.

The wind no longer came in gusts. It came as a constant, furious breath. You could no longer read it, you could only endure it. Sails were reefed, ropes snapped, hands slipped, wood creaked like a fevered body. And through it all was that leak below, that small, cold mouth, still slobbering as if saying: I have time. You don't.

Briggs finally roared. Not out of panic, but because sometimes the only way to make headway against the wind is with more wind. "Hold the bow!" he shouted. "Not sideways!"

Sideways was death. Sideways is when a wave hits you and the ship decides it'd rather capsize today. No ship capsizes slowly. It capsizes like a sentence that suddenly breaks off.

Tom worked like a madman. He pulled, knotted, cursed, and once even let out a short laugh when a wave tried to rip his hat, or whatever he was wearing, off him. Tom laughs when things get serious because then he doesn't have to think. Thinking is pain for him, and he only wants to inflict pain on others.

The woman was everywhere and nowhere. She didn't run, she didn't rush, she moved like someone who has long known that haste only leads to stumbling. She helped a man whose hand had been torn on the rope, tied a piece of cloth around it, and pushed him back to work as if she were both his god and his misfortune.

I stayed at the transition between deck and belly, because that was now our lifeline. Above, the wind. Below, the water. In between, us, this ridiculous bridge of flesh and curses.

"How's it going?" Briggs shouted at me.

"It's holding!" I shouted back.

"Hält" is a word with teeth. "Hält" doesn't mean it's good. "Hält" only means it's not over yet.

A wave crashed over the railing so hard it knocked two men off their feet at once. One slid almost to the edge. I jumped over, grabbed him by the belt, and pulled. He was heavy,

because water makes men heavy. He clung to me as if I were land. I'm not land. I'm just another man, scared. But in that moment, that's enough.

The second man was less fortunate. He hit his head on something—a mast, a crate, anything—and lay still. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see. He was breathing, but incorrectly. His body was there, the rest of him was somewhere in the sea.

"Get down!" the woman shouted. "Away from the water!"

Two men dragged the unconscious man into shelter as best they could. Shelter on deck is always relative. A storm has no respect for corners.

I ran back downstairs. The leak was there, the plug was in place, but water was still seeping in. Not much. But enough to hear. Water in a ship is like an insect in your ear. You can't ignore it.

"Pump!" I shouted.

Arms pumped. Backs arched. One of the men below—a short man with red hair—began to cry as he pumped. Not loudly, just tears running down his face, mixed with sweat. He apologized, stammering something about "I can't help it."

"Cry quietly and pump loudly," I said. "The sea doesn't hear tears, but it hears when you stop."

He nodded and kept pumping. That's all I want from a person: keep going.

Then I heard a noise above us, worse than wind: a crack, followed by a flapping. A sail tear. A big one. Not just a small shred. A real rip, as if someone were tearing a bedsheet to shreds to strangle you.

Tom shouted something up top, and I knew: if we lose sails, we lose control. And control is the only difference between a storm and a grave.

I ran upstairs. The deck was a surging thing of water, wood, and men. A sail hung in tatters, whipping about, lashing out at anything within reach. It was like a wild animal made of cloth that no one rode anymore.

"Take it down!" yelled Briggs.

Men jumped down. One was hit in the arm, cried out, let go, and slid down. Another stepped into a rope loop, stumbled, and I saw the railing coming closer again. Always that railing. Always that damned edge.

I grabbed the rope, pulled, knotted it, felt my fingertips tear open. Blood on the rope doesn't make it any more slippery, but it does make you angrier. And anger sometimes helps, because anger is stupid, and stupidity is tenacious. Tenacity keeps you short in life.

Tom jumped up beside me, grinning even though his face was wet. "See?" he shouted. "That's honest!"

"Shut your mouth and pull!" I shouted.

He laughed and pulled, and I realized: Maybe a ship sometimes needs exactly these kinds of bastards. Bastards who laugh in the storm because otherwise they'll break.

The woman shouted: "Knife! Cut it free!"

A few men hesitated. Cutting means loss. Loss hurts. But in a storm, hesitation is death.

I drew my knife and cut off a piece of the whipping fabric that had caught in a block. The fabric tore further, fluttered away like a blackbird, and for a moment I thought: There goes another piece of us. Not just sails. Hope.

Then came the blow that almost sent me into the sea.

A wave hit us from the side, even though Briggs was trying to hold the bow. Maybe it wasn't a mistake. Maybe the sea was simply faster. The ship lurched, and I lost my footing. My hand slipped on the rope, and suddenly there was only air and water.

I didn't fall gracefully. I fell like a sack.

The edge of the railing hit me in the ribs, hard. Pain exploded, short and sharp. For a moment everything was white. And then I felt my legs slide outwards, towards the water. The sea pulled. It didn't pull like a hand. It pulled like a promise: Come. Finally. Let go.

I saw no face, no flag, no gold. I only saw black beneath me.

A hand grabbed my collar.

Tom.

Of course, Tom.

He pulled, cursed, and clenched his teeth. "Not today, you beard!" he roared.

I reached for wood, for rope, for anything. My fingers found an edge, I pulled myself up, coughed, spat out salt, and the salt tasted like mockery.

"Thank you," I gasped.

Tom grinned crookedly, water oozing from his stubble. "You owe me rum," he said.

"You owe me peace," I gasped.

Tom laughed. "There's peace and quiet down below," he shouted, nodding towards the sea. "And you don't want to go there yet, do you?"

I spat. He was right. Silence is just another word for dead.

I scrambled to my feet, felt my ribs. Pain, but not broken. Hopefully. At sea, you hope for the little things, because big hopes only fool you.

Briggs shouted new orders, held the bow, fought against wind and water as if he were personally insulting the sea. The men worked, some with wide eyes, some with that dull "just do it" attitude you get when you feel nothing anymore. And deep inside, somewhere in the belly, lay gold, pretending to save us when in truth it only made us heavier.

I stood there again, my heart like a hammer, salt in my eyes. And I thought: The sea wanted to keep me, yes. It had already grabbed me by the jacket. It had already kissed my ribs. And if it truly wanted me, it wouldn't come with a grand moment. It would come in a small moment. A slip. A wrong move. A rope snapping.

So I held on tight. Not to the wood.

The decision.

Not today.

The storm reaches a point where you stop hoping it will pass and start hoping you'll outlast it. That's not courage, that's tenacity. Tenacity is the only thing a pirate and a board have in common: both float as long as they don't break.

We had reached that point. You could see it in their faces. No more theatrics. No more big curses. Just this blunt: Do it. Pull. Hold. Breathe. Survive.

The water continued to crash over the deck, but not as chaotically as at the beginning. The storm now had a rhythm. A wicked rhythm, but a rhythm nonetheless. Wave, wind, wave, wind. As if the sea were playing a melody, and we were the instruments it was trying to destroy.

Briggs held the bow with a stubbornness that was almost religious. If the man believed in anything, it was direction. Direction was his religion. Not God. Not gold. Not flags. Direction.

Tom was everywhere, jumping, pulling, cutting, occasionally letting out a short laugh when another splash of water hit him in the face. The bastard was like a rat dancing in a burning kitchen because he knows he's fast enough anyway.

The woman had been by the pumps down below, and when she came back up, her face was wet, but not from the sea. She had blood on her hands, not much, but enough for me to know: someone down there had lost more than just water.

"How many?" I shouted at her, because you can't whisper in a storm.

She held up two fingers. Then she added half a finger. That meant: one was gone, one was half. Half is a word you can't use for long at sea. Half either becomes whole or dead.

"Leak?" I shouted.

"Hold on!" she shouted back.

It holds. There it is again, that word with teeth. And I thought: When we get out of here, this ship won't be the same. Not because of the wood. Because of the heads.

Then something happened that storms often do: they suddenly became quieter. Not peaceful, but cunning. The wind subsided for a moment. The waves remained large, but they became smoother. It was as if the sea were taking a breath, preparing to bite harder.

"Attention!" Briggs yelled. "This is the trap!"

He was right. When things quiet down for a moment, men become careless. Carelessness is what the sea waits for.

And of course it happened.

A rope we had temporarily secured no longer held its tension. Perhaps it was too old. Perhaps the knot was wrong. Perhaps it was simply bad luck. The rope snapped with a crack that sounded like a gunshot. And the whipping end lashed across the deck.

It wasn't just wood that was affected.

It hit the man Hale.

I saw it like a bad dream: the rope slammed against his chest and hurled him backward. Not over the railing, but close enough that I saw the abyss beside him. Hale fell hard, rolled, and his hand grasped at thin air because the deck beneath him was wet as soap.

I started running, almost slipped myself, caught myself on a post, and jumped on. Hale slipped again, and then he was at the edge. His fingers dug into the wood, his nails snapped, and on his face was not panic, but surprise. Surprise is the most honest fear. Because it shows you that you thought you were prepared.

"Stop!" I yelled.

He looked at me, his eyes wide. "I..." he gasped.

"Stop!" I repeated, because words are otherwise meaningless.

I reached for him and grabbed his forearm. It was slippery, wet, and cold. My fingers almost slipped off. I cursed, gripped harder, and felt my hand almost cramp up. Hale slid a little further, and then there was only wood, my hand, and the sea below, which was already opening its mouth.

Tom was faster than I expected. He came from the side, threw himself to the ground, grabbed Hale's leg, and pulled. Two men joined in, helped, and together we pulled Hale back like a piece of meat from a mouth.

Hale lay there, gasping, her fingers bloody, her eyes wide.

"You wanted to live," I gasped in his ear.

He nodded, gasping for air as if air were now money.

"Then stop pretending you deserve it," I said. "You have to take it."

He blinked, and for a moment there was hatred in his eyes. Not at me. At the truth. Then there was only fear again. Useful. Alert.

Briggs kept shouting, had the broken rope secured, had the damage contained. Men ran, tied knots, pulled. And while we were doing that, the next wave came.

Not the biggest, but the meanest, because it came at the exact moment we thought we were back in control. It crashed over the railing, ripped away a bucket, knocked a man off his knees. The man—one of the loyalists—slid, and for a moment I saw his body in the exact position I had been in earlier: half over the edge, the sea below like a bed calling you.

I jumped down, grabbed, and pulled. Again. Over and over again.

The sea wanted to keep us, not just me. It wanted the ship, the men, the gold, the flag. It wanted everything that floats, because swimming is an insult. Swimming means: I am withdrawing from you. And the sea hates withdrawal.

Hours passed, or minutes, I don't know. Time in a storm is like teeth grinding. You only notice that it starts to hurt eventually.

Then, very slowly, the wind truly began to die. Not as a trick. Out of exhaustion. Even storms get tired. Perhaps because they've had enough. Perhaps because they realize we're tougher than we look.

The waves diminished, not immediately, but they lost their vicious edge. The sky remained gray, but the gray became lighter. And at some point, there was this moment when you realize: We're still here.

Men let go of ropes, sank onto the planks, gasped, laughed, cried, vomited. One even kissed the wood as if he had just seen God. Perhaps he had. God in the form of not sinking.

Briggs was still at the wheel. He didn't look relieved. He just looked like a man who had done the math and realized: it worked out. That was his good fortune.

Tom was leaning against a mast, completely soaked, and grinned at me. "Not today," he said.

"Not today," I said.

The woman came towards me, her eyes briefly on my back. "You're bleeding," she said.

"The sea too," I said.

She snorted softly. "The sea doesn't bleed."

"Then it should," I said.

I went to the railing and looked into the water. It was shallower again, calmer, but still that black thing staring at you as if it were remembering your taste. And I thought: Today it almost got me. Twice. It pushed my body against the edge, threw salt in my eyes, showed me how quickly a person can become a dot.

The sea wanted to keep me.

And it will try again.

Not out of hatred.

Out of habit.

Just like we men keep trying to destroy ourselves, even though we know exactly how close we are to the edge.

I wiped water from my face, tasted salt and blood, and I didn't smile. No judgment this time. Just this dry realization: Every day you don't sink isn't a victory. It's only a reprieve.

And procrastination is the only thing a pirate truly possesses.

Betrayal came without warning.

The storm was gone, but it hadn't left us clean. It had shaken us like a dog and then spat us out, wet, sore, reeking of salt and fear. The deck was covered in scrapes, torn pieces of fabric, bruises, and men acting as if they were indestructible, even though they would flinch at the slightest crack.

After a night like that, some people talk about gratitude. I call it relief, which briefly pretends to be happiness. Relief is dangerous. It makes you soft at the very moment when you need to stay strong. And when you soften, someone comes along and tests you. Not the sea. People. People have no patience, but they have ideas.

Briggs didn't allow any celebration. No extra rum, no "well done," no pat on the back. He made us repair the damage as if it were all normal. Maybe it was normal for him. For me, it was just further proof that we're riding on a thin plank of wood through a world that hates us.

Hale sat at his side, his fingers bandaged, staring into the water as if he could still feel it pulling at him. He was one of the few who didn't pretend it hadn't happened. I liked that. Honesty is rare. And yet: honesty isn't a shield. You can be honest and still have a knife up your sleeve.

The boy with the tarry mouth was still hanging from the mast, almost a part of the ship. I could sometimes hear him breathing, that tenacious, dull life that refused to give in. It sounded like a curse that wasn't finished.

Down below, they kept pumping, even though the leak had slowed. Slow is good, but slow is also a lie. A leak is a leak. And a man who has lied once remains a liar. You can just hide it better.

In the afternoon the sky cleared, and a bit of sun broke through, as if the world were briefly pretending to be friendly. The men became louder. Not exactly cheeky, but more lively. Lively is the state in which stupidity begins to dance again.

Tom came over to me, grinning as if the storm had just been a good game. "The sea didn't get you," he said.

"Not today," I said.

"You sound like a priest," he mocked.

"Priests are better liars," I said. "I haven't learned how."

Tom laughed. "You've learned other things."

I could feel my back where the wound was stuck, and my ribs where the railing had kissed me. Studying always hurts. And if it doesn't hurt, it was just a movie in your head.

Briggs stayed at the helm and set a course. No port, no detour. Just onward, as if one could sail away from one's own stench.

"Double watch tonight," he said later, without looking at me. "And no one goes down alone."

"Because of Keene?" I asked.

"Because of you," said Briggs.

That was one of those sentences that makes your stomach churn. Briggs never talks about you unless he means, "I don't trust any of you." And I couldn't even argue with him.

Dusk fell, and with it that tranquil sound everyone loves: water, just water again. No walls, no whipping ropes, no crackling like a gunshot. Just the sea. The sea that just moments ago threatened to devour you can, in the next hour, look like a damned lullaby. That's its greatest cruelty.

I went on my rounds. Not because I had to. Because otherwise I couldn't calm down. I saw the crates, the tarpaulins, the guards. Jory was there, awake, tense, with that clear fear I prefer to any bravery. Hale was nearby too, helping to repair a rope, slowly, carefully, as if every movement were a reminder of the edge.

"Everything alright?" I asked him.

He nodded, but his gaze averted. Not a dramatic avoidance. Just a half-hearted one. And half-measures are the most dangerous.

"You want to live," I said.

He swallowed. "Yes."

"Then stay with the living," I said. "Not with the thoughts that grow big at night."

He nodded again, too quickly. Too quickly often means lying or shame. Both can kill you.

Later, when it was dark and the men had retreated to their corners, nothing happened at first. That's precisely the moment when you stop listening closely. And that's exactly when it happens.

There was no loud bang. No scream. No drama.

It was a soft clinking sound.

I heard it from the descent, that small metallic sound that shouldn't be there. Metal hitting metal. Not a chain, not a tool. Something small. Something you hold in your hand.

I stopped, exhaled, and my body immediately turned cold. Not from fear. From clarity.

I went downstairs. Quietly. Quickly. No shouting. No "who's there?" "Who's there?" is an invitation to disappear.

It was dark downstairs, with only a dim lantern burning. And then I saw it: The chain on Keene's shackle was different. Not open, but shifted. One link had been repositioned, as if someone had been working on it. And there was something on the ground that hadn't been there before.

A small wire. Thin. Bent. Improvised.

I picked it up and held it up to the light. That wasn't by chance. That was craftsmanship. Poor quality, but clearly intentional.

"Shit," I muttered.

A faint sound came from the darkness. No breath. A stifled laugh.

Keene.

"You can smell it," he whispered, as if he were pleased that I noticed.

"Who was here?" I asked.

Keene blinked slowly. "A friend," he whispered. "Or someone who thinks they are one."

"Names," I said.

Keene smiled. "Names are dangerous," he whispered. "For you."

I stepped closer. "You're not getting out of here," I said.

"I don't need to go out," Keene whispered. "I just need to move."

"Who?" I asked.

Keene looked at me, and his gaze was so calm it infuriated me. Calmness with him is always a lie. "Those who want to live," he whispered. "And those who believe they have a right."

I turned around and headed back towards the stairs. And then I heard it: footsteps upstairs. More than one. Not the heavy, open footsteps of guards. Light footsteps. Footsteps hoping no one would hear them.

I stood in the shadow of the decline, my knife in my hand, without drawing it. Not yet. My body was ready, my mind clear.

Then a shadow appeared, at the top of the stairs. A figure, cautious, as if praying the floorboards wouldn't creak. In its hand, something dark. Not dew. Not a bucket. A bottle.

Rum.

Rum is the best disguise for poison and the worst disguise for guilt.

The man came down a little and whispered: "Keene...?"

Keene didn't answer aloud. He let the man come closer. Keene is patient like a rat who knows you'll eventually fall asleep.

The man took another step. The light from the lantern grazed his face, and I recognized him.

Hale.

The quiet one. The one who wanted to live. The one we had just pulled back from the sea.

I felt something inside me briefly rupture. Not pity. Not disappointment. More like this hard, dry: Of course. Of course it is. Of course betrayal doesn't come with drums. It comes with a man you've just shaken hands with.

Hale saw Keene's chains, but didn't see the wire because he didn't want to see it. He saw only the possibility. And there was no joy in his face. Only necessity, as he told himself.

"I... I have to..." whispered Hale.

Keene smiled in the dark. "Yes," Keene whispered. "You must."

Hale lifted the bottle slightly, as if it were an ID badge. "I delivered," he whispered. "Like you said."

Keene closed his eyes briefly, as if enjoying the scent. "Good," he whispered. "Then you're almost free."

Free. The word that drives men to their deaths.

I stepped out of the shadows.

"You are not free," I said calmly. "It's just your turn."

Hale froze. His eyes opened wide, and for a moment I saw in him the man whom the sea had almost taken. Only this was worse because it was human.

"You," he whispered.

"I," I said.

He raised the bottle a little higher, not as a weapon, more as protection. "I just wanted to live," he said.

"And you feed Keene for that?" I asked.

Hale swallowed. "He said..."

I almost laughed. Almost. This sentence haunts us like a disease.

"He said," I repeated, my voice so cold that even I didn't like it. "And you heard what you wanted to hear."

Hale trembled. "You don't understand—"

"Yes," I said. "I understand all too well. You want a shortcut. You want to buy something somewhere. And you've chosen the worst store."

Keene whispered from the darkness: "He is clever. He is afraid."

I wasn't looking at Keene. I was looking at Hale. "Fear is useful," I said. "But you're using it wrong. You're using it against the ship."

Hale swallowed, and I saw his fingers tighten around the bottle. Maybe because he now realizes that words aren't enough. Maybe because he's about to jump. Maybe because betrayal always strikes when he realizes he's been caught.

And at that exact moment I heard footsteps upstairs again.

More.

Not quiet. Hurried.

As if someone knew that now is the moment.

The footsteps above were no longer cautious. They had this hurried stamping that says: Screw secrecy, now only speed matters. That's the moment when a plan ceases to be a plan and becomes an accident that demands blood.

Hale stood there with the bottle of rum, as if it were a ticket out of the gutter. His hands were trembling not just with fear, but also with defiance. The guy had already made up his mind, and when men make decisions, they're like doors: either open or closed. His was closed, and I was on the wrong side.

"Put it down," I said.

"You are not my captain," Hale gasped.

I almost grinned. Such a stupid truth at such a stupid moment. "That's right," I said. "I'm just the one who kept you alive."

That hit him hard. You saw it in his face, like a hand briefly choking him. It's a nasty rope's fault when it wraps around your neck. He shook his head as if he could shake off the guilt like water. "You didn't save me," he spat. "You dragged me back onto the ship. That's not saving me. That's just... back in the cage."

"The cage is floating," I said. "Outside there is only blackness."

Keene chuckled softly, that swallowed, dirty chuckle, as if he were applauding himself. "He hears you," he whispered. "But he prefers to hear me."

I ignored Keene because you don't stare at poison if you don't intend to swallow it. I kept my eyes on Hale. "Who else is in?" I asked.

Hale swallowed. His gaze flickered briefly upwards, towards the stairs. Shadows moved up there. More than one. An arm, a shoulder piece, a knife handle, briefly catching the lantern light. Knives are never there by chance.

"No one," Hale lied.

"Yes," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be breathing so stupidly."

Then they came down. Three men. Not the loudest ones from before, not those who had been at the forefront of the last open fight. That made it worse. These were the ones who had learned their lesson. The ones who had seen how badly things go when you come in openly. The ones who now wanted to be quiet and cunning.

One of them was Jory.

The boy by the crates, who told me earlier he was scared. Sure. He was scared. And fear is a tool. He just didn't use it to survive. He used it to justify his actions when he lashed out.

When he saw me, his mouth twitched. As if he were about to say "Sorry." Sorry is also a tool. It softens you up before the knife comes.

"You," Jory whispered.

"I," I said.

The third man was one of the repairmen I'd barely noticed. The kind who's always working on the wood and never on the chatter. You think men like that are harmless. Until you realize their hands know how to take things apart.

"What is it?" I asked calmly.

Keene whispered: "This is the future."

"Shut your mouth," I said, without looking at him.

Hale lifted the bottle slightly, as if to show: I have something. He was so proud of this small amount of power that it would almost have been cute if it weren't so disgusting. "We're getting him out," Hale said.

"Why?" I asked.

Jory took a step closer. His eyes were large, moist. He wasn't a born traitor. He was made one. Made of hunger, of fear, of the belief that someone owed him something. "Because Briggs is hanging us," he said. "Because you're keeping us under his thumb. Because..." He paused, searching for a sentence that didn't sound like: I'm a damned thief. "Because we don't want to die."

I exhaled. "Then you're on the wrong track," I said.

The repairman – the one with the silent hands – didn't pull his knife all the way out, but enough for me to see the steel. "It doesn't matter where it's gone," he said. "Just get it away from Briggs."

"Briggs is the ship," I said.

Jory shook his head too quickly. "Briggs is the gallows," he whispered.

Keene chuckled softly again. "See?" he whispered. "Fear, beautifully shaped."

Hale stared at me as if he expected me to understand. Traitors always have that look: Please tell me I'm not the bad guy. Please give me a story where I can still be a good man while I stab you in the back.

"You wanted to live," I said to Hale. "And now you're bringing death on board."

"I bring freedom," Hale spat.

"Freedom," I repeated. "You mean: chaos with rum."

Hale blushed. "You're making fun of me."

"Yes," I said. "Because otherwise I would throw up."

Jory raised his hands as if to mediate, and I almost believed him if I hadn't seen his fingers twitching on the knife handle. "We don't want you," he said hastily. "We just want... you to step aside."

"To the side," I said. "How elegant."

The repairman stepped a step behind me, trying to cut off the staircase. Good. Clever. I felt the room shrink. Staircases suck because they take away angles. Angles are life.

"You can't lead Keene," I said, as calmly as I could. "Keene leads you."

Hale swallowed. "He has a plan."

"He always has a plan," I said. "And in the end, you'll be lying in the water and he'll be in your heads."

Keene whispered, as if crawling into my ear: "You shouldn't be so nice. Being nice makes you slow."

I felt my knife in my hand. Not drawn yet. Just felt it. The feeling calms you, even if it destroys you later.

"Briggs will kill us," Jory said, his voice almost breaking. "He's setting an example. I don't want to be an example."

"Then stop building one," I said.

Hale took a step forward. "Out of the way," he said.

That was his moment. The moment he realized: words weren't enough. He wasn't brave, he was simply forced to play bravely. He raised the bottle, no longer as rum, but as a club.

"Don't do it," I said.

He did it.

The bottle came hurtling toward my head, and I turned sideways, letting it whiz past me. Glass clanged against wood, shattered, rum sprayed, the smell rising instantly, as if the ship were trying to get itself drunk. Hale stumbled in his own momentum, and in that stumble lay his whole truth: He is not a fighter. He is a man who believes a plan makes him strong.

Jory saw the moment and pulled out his knife.

I was quicker than his courage. I kicked him in the forearm, precisely, hard. The knife didn't fall immediately, but it suddenly pointed somewhere that would help no one. Jory cried out, more from shock than pain, and that shock made him dangerous because he was now blind.

The repairman came from behind, of course. Knife. The steel slid through the air, and I felt it brush against my sleeve, like a cold kiss. I wriggled around, grabbed his wrist, squeezed, and he was strong, stronger than he looked. Still doesn't mean weak. Still often just means: stored away.

We were wrestling, two men in the cramped stairwell, rum on the floor like oil. My foot slipped, and for a moment I thought: Shit, this is how it ends. Nothing grand. Nothing legendary. Just like a drunk on a staircase.

I jerked my head forward, hitting him on the bridge of the nose. There was a crack, he cursed, his hand went weak, and the knife clanged against the planks. I kicked it away because knives always want to go where you don't want them to.

Hale had recovered his composure and grabbed a piece of wood, something from the crate. He wanted to strike again because he was already too deep in. People often strike again when they realize the first blow didn't save them.

"Hale!" I shouted.

He paused briefly. And in that instant I saw it: He is not evil. He is merely cowardly, and cowardice is the mother of betrayal.

"If you do that," I said, "then you are no longer the person who wanted to live. Then you are only the person who killed to feel better."

His gaze flickered. He trembled. He wanted to believe he could still turn back. And perhaps he could.

Then came Keene's voice, quiet, venomous, at exactly the right moment: "He'll hang you anyway."

Hale froze. That was the catch. Keene knew where to put it. Fear, again. Tool. Handle.

Hale shouted angrily and lifted the wood.

And I knew: Betrayal truly came without warning. Not with a grand speech. Not with a flag. Not with a knife in the sun. But with a man who had just been saved and now believed he had to buy his place.

I stepped forward, taking the blow not on the head, but on the forearm. Pain shot up, hot, brutal. I grabbed Hale by the collar, pulled him close, so close he must have tasted my breath.

"The ship is not your enemy," I growled. "You are your enemy."

His eyes were wild. Rum, fear, Keene, all in one look. And behind him, I suddenly heard loud footsteps upstairs.

Do not take hasty, traitorous steps.

Heavy, clear steps.

Briggs.

And when I heard Briggs' boots on the stairs, I knew: Now there are no more excuses, no half measures, no more secret plans.

Now a decision will be made about who will still be allowed to breathe here.

Briggs' footsteps on the stairs didn't sound like help. They sounded like a judgment taking its time. Each step said: I saw this coming. And each step also said: That's the end of your little dreams.

Hale hung in my hand like a wet sack that had suddenly sprouted teeth. His arm burned where I'd broken his grip, and his breath reeked of rum and fear. Rum on the floor glistened in the lantern light like a puddle of foolish hope. Jory stood a few paces away, his arm half-broken, the knife lost somewhere, his eyes wide like a child caught stealing. The repairman held his nose, blood trickling from it, and looked at me with that quiet fury that says: I was almost free. Almost.

Keene sat bound in the background, his face as always: too calm. As if he were amused by each and every one of us, as if we were animals he simply had to lure to the right spot with food.

Briggs reached the bottom, stopped, and didn't immediately look at Keene, but at the puddle of rum, at the wire, at the torn hands, at me. He saw everything without raising his voice. That was the worst thing about him. He didn't have to shout to make you feel small. He just had to look.

"What is it?" he asked.

I let go of Hale, but not completely. I pushed him against the wall so he wouldn't get any stupid ideas right away. "They wanted to feed him," I said. "And his chain."

Briggs' gaze slid to Keene. Keene smiled slightly. Not broadly. Just enough so you know he finds this delicious.

"Who?" asked Briggs.

Jory opened his mouth as if he wanted to speak. That was a mistake. Talking is rarely a good idea with Briggs.

"You," Briggs said to Jory.

Jory swallowed. "I... I was scared," he whispered.

Briggs nodded slowly. "Yes," said Briggs. "You were afraid. And you used it like an idiot."

Jory began to tremble. Not from the cold. From the moment he realized: there was no longer a story to save him.

Briggs looked at Hale. "And you?" he asked.

Hale wanted to be proud, but pride doesn't stick well when your blood is still warm. "I wanted to live," he said hoarsely.

I almost heard myself laugh, but it didn't come out. It got stuck somewhere in my chest and turned into disgust.

Briggs took a step closer. Not a hasty step. A step like a nail driven into wood. "You wanted to live," Briggs repeated. "Then you attacked the man who pulled you from the sea, and you went to a prisoner as if he were your lifeboat."

Hale swallowed. "He... he said—"

"He said so," Briggs interrupted, his voice still calm, but now with a sharp edge. "You guys always say that right before you screw up. You give him your heads, and then you act like it wasn't your hand."

Keene whispered, as if he were sharing a little secret with us all: "Fear makes you so honest."

Briggs turned his head, very slowly, towards Keene. "You," said Briggs.

Keene smiled. "I did," he whispered.

Briggs walked up to him, stopped, and for a moment I thought: Now he's going to knock his teeth out. Not because he's losing control. Because he's making a point. But Briggs didn't hit him. He didn't kneel down. He didn't do anything human. He just looked.

"You will not be free," Briggs said.

Keene blinked slowly. "Freedom is a word," he whispered. "I only need words."

"You're not getting any words today," Briggs said.

Keene grinned a little wider. "Then give me some action," he whispered.

Briggs stood up again and turned to us. "Upstairs," he said.

No "please". No "come". Just a command, like a rope around the neck.

I grabbed Hale by the collar and pulled him up. He didn't really resist anymore. He was already half in his head, in that place where men construct victim narratives because otherwise they can't bear what they've done. Jory walked away on his own, his arm pressed to his side. The repairman was grabbed by Tom, who was suddenly there, as if he'd grown out of the wood. Tom wasn't grinning. Tom was silent. Silent to him meant: He wanted to cut, but he was waiting for permission.

Up above, the night was colder, as if the sea had given us one last breath. The crew had woken up. You can't betray people quietly. Betrayal makes a sound, even in a whisper. Men stood in groups, their eyes like nails. Some looked at Hale, some at Jory, some at me, as if checking whether this would lead to more bloodshed.

Briggs didn't put us outside the railing. He put us under the flag.

That was intentional. Everything at Briggs is intentional.

"Look," he said to the team.

No screaming. But it still worked, because everyone suddenly fell silent. Silence is the space in which punishment grows.

"These men," Briggs said, "tried to feed a prisoner. They tried to open a chain. They tried to open the ship."

Hale raised his head. "I just wanted—"

Tom tugged at Hale's collar so hard he almost gagged. "Close your mouth," Tom muttered.

Hale gasped, but he remained silent.

Briggs looked out at the crowd. "Who helped them?" he asked.

No one answered. Of course not. Helpers are always invisible until they themselves fall.

"Good," said Briggs. "Then I'll help you now."

A few men didn't understand that right away. Then they understood, and you could see it in their eyes: This is going to hurt.

Briggs pointed at Hale. "You," he said. "You wanted to live. You get life."

Hale blinked as if it were a gift.

"You'll get it without rum," Briggs continued. "Without sleep. Without friends. You'll pump day and night until your hands are no longer hands. You'll kiss the joint that almost sank you. You'll tell the water every day: Not today."

Hale wanted to protest, but his face already betrayed that this idea frightened him more than death itself. Death is swift. Pumping is long. Pumping is humiliation with rhythm.

Briggs pointed at Jory. "You were scared," he said. "Good. You'll get more."

Jory whispered: "Please..."

Briggs ignored the word as if it were dirt. "You'll be standing guard by the crates. Alone. Every night. And you'll learn that fear doesn't mean you'll steal or betray. Fear means you'll tremble and still do the right thing."

Jory sobbed. "Alone?"

"Yes," said Briggs. "Alone. So you can realize how loud your head is when no one is telling you stories."

The repairman wanted to say something. He wasn't the type for pleas, more for silent contempt. Briggs cut him off before he could speak. "And you," said Briggs, "you pulled out your knife because you thought silent meant invisible. Silent just means I'll see you later."

Tom gave a short laugh, like a dog hearing a bone word.

Briggs nodded in Tom's direction. "Tie them up," he said.

Ropes arrived. Hands grabbed. Hale resisted once, only half-heartedly, more out of reflex than courage. Tom pushed him down, not brutally, more efficiently. Jory was strapped down, and his tears simply flowed because he could no longer control himself. The repairman said nothing, but his eyes burned. Eyes burn for a long time.

I stood there, watched, felt the pain in my arm, and realized: Keene had gotten what he wanted again. Not freedom. But influence. Because this scene shows everyone: There are cracks. There are people who break. And every man who sees this secretly wonders if he'll be next.

Briggs stepped in front of the bound men and looked out at the crowd. "This is not mercy," he said. "This is maintenance."

Maintenance. The word was so cold it was almost funny. People as parts that you repair or replace.

"And if anyone thinks," Briggs continued, "they need to pull off another number like that, then I'll save myself the maintenance. It'll be short."

In short, that was his way of saying "death" without wasting the word.

The team swallowed. One coughed. One spat into the water. And somewhere in the background I heard Keene breathing softly, as if he were pleased that we could all feel something again.

Briggs left. Just like that. No further words. He left us with the smell of fear, fresh as tar.

Tom stayed beside me, looked at Hale, who was tied up and now finally understood that "wanting to live" isn't a contract you sign. It's a daily struggle that wears you down.

"You almost talked him into it," Tom murmured.

"I tried," I said.

Tom snorted. "Trying is also a word."

I looked at Hale. His gaze met mine, and I saw nothing heroic in him. Just a man who had realized that his own mind had betrayed him before anyone else did.

"Betrayal," Tom said softly, as if he could taste the word. "It always comes without warning."

I nodded. "And yet it's still the same stench," I said.

Then I turned and went to the crates, because the night wasn't over yet. Because Keene was still breathing down below. Because the sea was still waiting outside. Because on a ship like that, you never truly win. You only postpone dying.

And as I walked, I felt something inside me that I didn't like: a new kind of alertness. Not the alertness of the storm. Not the alertness of the battle. But the alertness you get when you realize you're not just fighting against wind and water.

But against people you have saved.

Bullets know no legends.

The next morning, the ship smelled of damp wood, cold rum, and the quiet hatred that men only develop when they catch themselves having almost destroyed everything. Hale was pumping down below, as Briggs had ordered, and each stroke of the pump sounded like a clock that tells you not the time, but the end. Jory stood by the crates, alone, his eyes red, his hands too stiff on the rifle, as if the thing were a cross he had to bear. The repairman hung strapped down like a bad argument no one wants to hear anymore.

I walked across the deck and realized: After betrayal, everything becomes quieter, but not more peaceful. It's like after a fight in a pub, when everyone's sitting down again, drinking, laughing – and you know that someone's about to get up and smash the bottle over your head, simply because they can't stand the fact that you're still breathing.

Briggs stood at the wheel, staring ahead as if insulting the horizon. He spoke little. When Briggs speaks little, it's never good. It means he's already made up his mind and is just waiting for the world to finally provide the perfect scene.

The scene came sooner than I would have liked.

Shortly after noon, we saw nothing at first. Just another patch of sky. A line that didn't match the sea. A bright spot that moved as if it were ashamed to be seen.

“Sails,” said one, and his voice was too high.

“How many?” Briggs asked, without turning his head.

The man squinted. “One... maybe two.”

Tom stood next to me, grinning crookedly. “Maybe,” he murmured. “Maybe it's God himself with a handkerchief.”

I spat. “God has better hobbies,” I said.

But my stomach clenched because I knew what it was. Not a dealer. Dealers don't hide in the light. That thing out there was an animal that smelled us. And animals that smell you come closer.

Briggs let the ship turn gently, without fuss. He acted as if it were just wind. As if we were still the ones determining the course. That's the beauty of stubborn people: they believe so firmly that they're right until they're shot down by the opposite.

The men became frantic, but quietly frantic. They weren't running. They acted as if they were working routinely. Ropes, sails, repairs. And beneath this spectacle, you could hear the metal: weapons being checked. Powder being moved. And the small, ugly prayer that everyone murmurs silently inside: Not me. Not today.

I went to the cannons. Our cannons were honest bastards, but honest bastards are sometimes just old bastards. You caress the metal, test the barrel, and you know: if this thing fails today, we'll fail right along with it.

"Dry powder?" I asked.

A man nodded. "Yes."

"No," I said. "Show me."

He lifted the lid and showed me the powder. Black, dry. Good. Good doesn't mean safe. It only means: You have a chance before the sea or the crown consumes you.

The woman came towards me, her eyes calm. Too calm for what was approaching from outside. "You can smell it," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Crown?" she asked.

"Crown," I said.

She nodded once. No fear on her face. But I saw it in the way she examined her knife. She wasn't examining the knife. She was examining herself.

Tom shouted from above: "It's a warship."

The word "warship" hit the men like a second wave. Warship means: cannons that don't rust. Men paid to hate you. Order so pristine it kills you and then washes its hands.

Briggs finally turned around. His gaze swept across the deck, over faces, over hands, over the places where fear likes to dwell. "No one's running," he said.

Nobody was running. But everyone wanted to. It was almost strange.

"Stay the course," said Briggs.

One stammered: "Stay the course? The—"

"Stay the course," Briggs repeated.

And then I understood: Briggs wants it. Not for pleasure. On principle. Briggs has this principle in his head that fleeing won't save you, it will only tire you out. Maybe he's right. Maybe he's just too proud to admit that he's afraid too.

I went over to him. "How close?" I asked.

Briggs looked ahead. "Close enough," he said.

I snorted. "That's not a number."

"Numbers are for accountants," said Briggs. "Here, it's simply a matter of being prepared or dead."

Tom approached, pushing his tongue against his teeth as if he already loved the taste of gunpowder. "They're going to shoot," he said.

"Of course," I said.

"And us?" asked Tom, and there was that childlike gleam in his voice that I hate about him because it's honest.

Briggs replied, "If they are within range."

The men were placed at the guns. Hands on wicks, on ramrods, on wheels. One cursed softly as his fingers trembled. I looked at him. "If you're trembling, tremble quietly," I said. "And when you can't load anymore, go pump. Water is more honest than fear."

He nodded, his eyes full of shame, and continued. Shame is also a tool. It keeps you working, because otherwise you'd hate yourself.

The warship drew closer, and now you could see its shape. High bow, clean lines, slicked-back like a soldier who thinks he smells better than us. On the side, the gun ports like eyes. Many eyes.

Then we heard the first thing that truly matters: the dull thunder of a volley, not from us, but from them. The sound came across the water like a hand slapping you from afar.

"Take cover!" someone shouted.

Briggs didn't shout. He just said, "Get down."

The cannonballs whistled. You don't hear cannonballs like in stories, where everything sings dramatically. You only hear a cutting, ugly whistle and then the crash. Wood splinters. Metal screams. A mast trembles. And somewhere a man who suddenly stops screaming because the air has been ripped from his body.

A bullet struck the railing, tearing a piece out as if the ship had lost a tooth. Shards flew, one hit me in the forearm. Not deep, but sharp. A small reminder. Bullets don't give you epic scars. They give you chance.

"Load up!" Tom yelled now, because Tom couldn't stand not yelling.

"Load!" I shouted along, because sometimes you have to be loud so that your own fear doesn't take over.

Men loaded. Powder. Bullet. Plug. The rhythm was suddenly there, like pumping. Except that pumping keeps you in the ship, and cannons can shoot you out of life.

I heard a scream from above. A man had been hit, not directly, but by shrapnel. He was clutching his shoulder, blood streaming down his face. He stared at me as if asking: Is that it? Is that death?

"Down," I said, and two of them grabbed him and dragged him away. Not gently. There's no such thing as gentle with bullets.

Briggs stayed at the wheel as if he could deflect the bullets with his eyes. Perhaps that was his talent. Perhaps it was simply his death wish.

"Range?" I shouted.

Briggs' eyes were narrowed. "Not yet," he said.

The warship fired again. This time lower. A bullet struck the hull. The ship vibrated as if it had been punched in the gut. Down below, I immediately heard voices: "Water!"

Of course. Water is always ready when bullets arrive. The sea works with the crown, without a contract, without a handshake.

Tom gave a short laugh, as if it were all a damn joke. "Listen?" he shouted to me. "The legend is getting holes!"

I looked at him. "Legends bleed too," I said.

"Bullets know no legends," the woman murmured, more to herself than to me.

And that was the sentence that stuck with me. Because it's true. You can have a beard, a flag, a name, stories. Bullets don't care about any of that. A bullet doesn't ask who you are. It only asks if your flesh gives way.

Briggs finally raised his hand. "Fire," he said.

Our cannons spat. The recoil shot through my bones. The smoke smelled of old anger. For a moment, you saw nothing but gray and heard only that dull, satisfying roar: We're doing something back. People love not just to suffer.

When the smoke cleared, I saw we'd hit something. Not big. Not heroic. But a hit nonetheless. Splinters of wood on the enemy, a bit of chaos on their deck. A man was running over there. Even the crown slips when it gets wet. Even the crown has flesh.

"Again!" yelled Tom.

"Shop!" I shouted.

And while men shoveled powder again, while the water below once more bared its teeth, while the warship above realigned itself, I noticed my heart grow calm. Not because I wasn't afraid. But because fear had now transformed into work. Into rhythm. Into purpose.

That's the trick. When bullets are flying, thinking is a luxury. Then you're just hand, eye, breath. And somewhere in that primitive state, I felt almost... fitting. As if that was all I was made for: not for talking, not for fame, not for regrets. For the moment when a bullet decides whether you have a story to tell today.

Bullets know no legends.

And that's exactly why, the moment they arrive, you have to stop trying to be a legend.

You just have to be a bastard who doesn't fall down.

After firing your first volley, everything briefly feels like justice. A warm pang in your gut, as if you've finally struck back, as if the world has momentarily realized that you have teeth too. The feeling lasts exactly until the next bullet comes and shows you that justice is a fairy tale told only by those who've never pulled splinters from their flesh.

The warship turned slightly, slick as a man who's learned how to kill without getting his shoes dirty. Her gun ports opened again like eyelids. And I thought: They've got routine. We've got anger. Routine eats anger for breakfast if anger isn't fast enough.

"Shop, you sons of bitches!" Tom roared, and his voice cut through the smoke as if it were a bullet itself.

Men were loading. Their hands trembled, but they did it anyway. Powder in, bullet in, plug, ramrod. You hear that dull scraping, the clacking, the breath that's too short. One whispered a prayer, and I wanted to rip his tongue out, not out of malice, but because prayers here always sound like surrender.

"Don't pray," I growled. "Aim."

He nodded like a dog that has just learned that the stick is real, and carried on.

Down below, men were yelling something about water. The hull had taken a hit, and water is like a bad thought: once it's in, it doesn't come out on its own. Briggs shouted down, "Keep pumping!" as if pumping were as natural as breathing. And maybe by now it was. Pump, load, curse, live.

The next enemy volley came lower. You hear the thunder first, then the whistling, and then the crash where wood sounds like bone. A ball hit the mast, not in the center, but close enough that the whole wooden structure briefly pretended to break. Splinters rained down. One lodged in a man's throat. He reached out, his fingers turning red, and he looked at me as if to ask, Is this the end of me? It wasn't dramatic. It was just fast.

He slumped, his knees making that soft thud on the planks that I hate because it sounds so final. Two men pulled him away, more out of reflex than dignity. Dignity is hard to bear when cannons are speaking.

I forced my gaze back at the enemy. Looking away is the beginning of falling.

"Fire!" Briggs yelled again.

Our cannons spat again. The recoil made my shoulders crack. Smoke briefly engulfed the world. When it cleared, I saw over there that we'd hit again, somewhere on the side. No major breach, no sinking miracle. But chaos. Men ran. One fell. That was enough to calm my stomach for a moment.

And then, as if the sea had planned it, a wave came, small compared to the storm, but perfectly timed. It crashed over our deck just as two men were crouching by a cannon. One slipped, his knee slammed against metal, he cried out, and let go of the ramrod. The rod

rolled, and the second man grabbed for it, stumbled, and for a moment it looked like a damned circus. A circus with gunpowder.

"Watch out!" I yelled, my voice sounding more like fear than a command.

Fear is useful, but it is also revealing. It shows you what you really are: an animal that doesn't want to die.

Tom shoved the stumbling man aside, hard, like you'd shove a sack. "Don't die by my gun!" he roared. "Die somewhere else!"

The man looked at him, hurt, angry. Then the next bullet came, and it struck the planks a few steps away. Wood splattered, and the man understood: Tom had just saved his life, not his feelings. You can take care of feelings later, when you still have hands.

The woman stood beside me, knife in hand, but she wasn't cutting anything. She was watching. Her eyes weren't following the smoke. They were following the men. She always looks at people because people are the real danger. Bullets are just metal. People give them direction.

"They want to slow us down," she said quietly.

"How?" I asked.

She nodded towards the sail. "They don't just shoot at bodies," she said. "They shoot at movement."

She was right. The warship was now aiming at our rigging, at ropes, at everything that made us maneuverable. If you don't sink a ship immediately, you render it helpless. Helpless is another word for: you're ready prey.

Briggs called a new course, let us bear away slightly, adjusted the bow. He tried to read the gunfire as if it were wind. And maybe you really can read cannons if you've survived long enough. Or maybe you just pretend to, so you don't go crazy.

Then came a hit that made my throat tighten.

A bullet struck near the crates.

Not directly into the tarpaulins, not into the gold – as if the ball knew that would be too poetic. It missed, tearing open some wood, ripping away part of the covering. For a moment, something yellow flashed beneath the tarpaulin, as if the gold itself were giving a brief wave.

And at that very moment I saw it in the eyes of two men: Not fear of the crown. Greed. Short, raw, automatic.

That made me angrier than any hit.

"Eyes away!" I yelled.

They flinched. One muttered, "I only—"

"You were just looking," I snarled. "Looking is what traitors do before they strike."

They swallowed, and I saw how ashamed they were. Shame is good. Shame keeps hands still.

Down below someone shouted again: "Water is rising!"

Of course. Bullets make holes, holes make water, water makes panic. Panic makes mistakes. And mistakes are the true ammunition of the crown.

I ran to the companionway and looked down. Men were pumping, a bucket further on, a rag across a crack, a piece of wood against it, cursing that sounded like a song you'd heard a thousand times before. Hale was actually pumping, just like Briggs had said, and his face was gray. His "wanting to live" now looked like work. Real work. Not those stupid thoughts up above.

He looked up when he noticed me. There was no longer any plea in his eyes. Only weariness and that silent question: Is that enough? Is it enough if I destroy myself now?

I said nothing. I just nodded once. Not as forgiveness. As recognition of function.

The fighting continued above. The warship was closer now, close enough that you could see individual figures. Men in uniforms, smartly dressed, clean. Cleanliness here is almost a provocation. They looked like people going home at the end of the day to count their wages. We looked like the ones they hang so others can go home.

The next volley came. A bullet struck one of our cannons right at the wheel. Metal screamed. The man next to it was hit by a splinter, not large, but right in the eye. His cry was short and high-pitched, and then he clutched his face, blood running down his fingers. He staggered, stumbled, and Tom grabbed him by the collar.

"Get out of the way!" yelled Tom. "You can't see anything anymore, so don't stand in the way!"

The man wept like a child, whimpering "I... I...", but Tom pushed him away because there's no room for tragedy in a fight. Tragedies come later, when you lie awake at night thinking.

I was back by my gun, helping to load it. My hands were sore, my back ached, my ribs throbbed, but my head was clearer than usual. Bullets clear your head because they blow all the crap out of your brain. You don't have time for pride, no time for legends. You only have time to avoid being where metal is about to hit.

Briggs shouted: "Even closer! We're cutting their angle!"

I half understood. Enough. We tried to position ourselves so that their side wouldn't get all the pressure on us, so they couldn't use their full breadth against us. Breadth is power. We had more tenacity.

"Fire!" shouted Briggs.

We fired again. This time I saw wood splinter on the hull over there. A piece of plank broke away, water sprayed. Men there were shouting orders. They had a problem. A small one. But sometimes small is all you need.

Tom grinned. "Ha!" he shouted. "They're bleeding!"

"Everything is bleeding," I said, more to myself than to him.

And then – as if the sea couldn't bear the fact that we were feeling good for a moment – came a noise from above: a sharp crack, followed by a heavy, ugly crash.

A section of the rigging gave way. A rope snapped, a block flew, struck wood, and hit a man—not fatally, but enough to make him slump like a sack. He lay there, breathing, but he was out of the fight.

Briggs' voice hardened. "Hold it!" he shouted. "Hold the damned ship!"

As if a ship is a dog that you can keep on a leash.

I looked up at the flag. It was still fluttering, black, dirty, defiant. And inside me was this thought, like a cold finger slicing down my spine: If we fall today, it will fall first. Not out of honor. Out of physics.

Bullets know no legends.

They know no flags, no names, no stories.

They only know the moment when you are exactly one step too late.

And I sensed that this moment was drawing nearer. Not as a premonition. As a statistic. As a calculation the sea and the crown make together, while we sweat up here, pretending to be immortal.

At some point in a fight, you stop fighting to win and stop fighting to avoid losing. It's a subtle difference, but it tastes different. Winning carries a lingering, nagging hope. Avoiding loss tastes only of metal and cold sweat.

The warship was close enough now that you could just make out their faces. Not clearly, but you could see how they moved. How orderly. How confident. That confidence was their strongest weapon. Confidence makes you calm, and calm makes you precise. We weren't calm. We were alive. And alive is loud.

Briggs tried to angle us so we wouldn't completely fall apart. He turned the ship, again and again, as if sharpening a knife on a stone. But every turn cost rope, cost sail, cost men who slipped because the deck was wet with water and blood. You can't be elegant when you're drowning.

"They're getting closer!" someone shouted from the railing.

"Let them come," Tom shouted back, and I briefly hated him for it because he so damn much likes looking at death as if it were a buddy.

Then came the volley that almost pulled our teeth out.

They weren't just shooting at the rigging or the hull anymore. They were shooting at deck level. At flesh level. The whistling came lower, faster. Wood splintered, a barrel exploded, and a bullet ripped through a group of two men as if they were mere lame arguments. One fell instantly. The other stood for a moment, looked at his stomach as if wondering why there was suddenly a hole there, and then he collapsed.

I heard no scream. Not because there wasn't one there. Because the sound of cannons drowns everything out. Screams of pain are small compared to metal.

The ground became more slippery. Blood is a shitty liquid on planks. It makes every step a gamble. I stepped into something warm, slipped, and just barely caught myself on a cannon. My heart was beating so hard I thought it would burst my ribs, which were already bruised from the storm.

"Load!" I shouted, and my voice no longer sounded like a command, but like a plea.

That was the moment I realized: I'm just a man, too. Not a myth. Not a beard. Not a curse. Just a body that doesn't like to be hit.

The woman was next to me, and her gaze was hard. "They want to board," she said.

"Not yet," I said.

"Yes," she said. "They cut us down, then they come."

And she was right. You could see it: The warship repositioned itself, as if it were no longer using the distance just for firing, but for seizing. Grappling hooks, rams, men with sabers. That's often how it ends: first bullets, then hands.

Briggs roared: "Get ready! When it's their turn, you'll burn their fingers off!"

A few men laughed nervously. "Keep your fingers off and burn them." Yes. That was the plan. The plan always sounds good until you see that the enemy has more fingers than you do.

Tom was in his element. He pulled out his knife, not to cut, but because he needed the feeling of holding something that wouldn't explode. "Finally close," he grinned, and his grin was pure sickness.

Then came the goal that changed everything.

A bullet—I don't know which one, I only know it was the right one—struck near the steering wheel. Wood exploded. A splinter hit a man helping Briggs, right in the temple. He fell over like a sack, and Briggs visibly flinched for the first time. Not from grief. From anger. Because his tool had just broken.

And then, as if that weren't enough, the steering wheel itself broke off in one spot. Not completely, but damaged. The ship suddenly became sluggish, as if it had received a blow to the brain.

“Shit!” I heard Briggs say, loudly, the rare word he only uses when things are really bad.

The warship seized the moment. Of course. They were waiting for just such an opportunity. Their next salvo came, and it hit us in the belly, deeper, closer to the waterline.

Downstairs you immediately heard the panicked cry: “Water!”

Water is always available. Always. It waits like a vulture.

Hale was probably already pumping iron like crazy, but pumping iron is a battle you don't see until it's lost. And when it's lost, everyone sees it.

I ran towards the stairway, but Tom grabbed my arm. “Not now!” he yelled. “If you go down, they'll get you up here!”

“If I don't go down, we'll sink!” I yelled back.

He held me for a moment, tightly, and his gaze held more than just bloodlust. There was also fear. Tom is afraid, but he likes to call it fun.

Briggs shouted: “Two down! Three to the pump!”

A few men broke free and ran downstairs. One stumbled halfway down, got up, cursed, and disappeared. I stayed upstairs because Briggs wanted me to, because Tom had held me back, and because I knew: if I chose the wrong place now, I wouldn't just be dead. Everything would be dead.

The warship was so close you could hear their commands, muffled but clear. Clean voices. Discipline. They sounded like people planning their day. I hated them for it.

“Fire!” Briggs roared, and our cannons spat again, but it sounded different now. Less rhythm. More desperation. Desperation is a bad loading slip.

We still managed to score. A hit on their side, more wood, more chaos. A man over there fell. And for a moment I thought: Maybe. Maybe that's enough. Maybe a little chaos scares them too. Maybe.

And then I saw them coming closer anyway. How, despite everything, they brought the bow up, how they prepared grappling hooks, how men stood at the railing with sabers, like hyenas, slicked-back, but still hyenas.

“They're coming!” shouted the woman.

“Then receive her!” yelled Tom.

My hands were wet and sore, and I could feel the knife on my belt. I could feel my ribs. I could feel the cut on my back. Scars throbbed as if they were counting. Not years. Seconds. And in my head was this one sentence, so banal it almost seems ridiculous when you think it amidst the roar of cannons:

Bullets know no legends.

And if they board us now, it won't be with bullets anymore.

Then it's hands, blades, teeth.

Then it's man against man again.

And then, in that moment, I realized something that frightened me: I was more afraid of the bullets than of the men. Because men at least make mistakes. Men hesitate. Men have names. Men can frighten you.

A bullet does not hesitate.

A sphere has no name.

A sphere is only a direction.

And direction was no longer our religion today.

Direction was our enemy today.

My blood was heavy

They approached like a clean thought in a dirty mind: swiftly, decisively, without regard for the damage they caused. The warship edged toward us, wood against wood, like two animals sniffing each other in the dark and then deciding that talking is overrated.

Grappling hooks flew. You hear that ugly clack as metal teeth slam into wood. The sound is like a promise: Now it's personal, you bastard. No more bullets searching blindly. Now it's eyes that want to find you.

"Take the hook off!" yelled Briggs.

Men rushed over, hacking with axes, slashing with poles, trying to pry those damned claws out again. A hook-wielding man tore open a section of the railing as if he were hungry. The first redcoat—clean coat, clean blade, clean face—jumped across and landed so gracefully that I instantly hated him. Elegance on a wet deck is an insult.

Tom was already there, as if he'd pre-ordered the jump. He wasn't grinning anymore. That was the creepy part. Tom without a grin is like a bottomless bottle: only what's in it comes out.

The Redcoat raised his saber. Tom didn't face him like a duelist. Tom faced him like a dog. He went low, fast, and his knife disappeared once briefly into the neat uniform, as if adjusting a piece of fabric. The Redcoat made a noise that sounded more surprised than painful, and fell as if someone had taken the very idea of bones away from him.

I saw it, and I thought: That's it. That's the simple difference between songs and life. In songs, they fight for a long time. In life, they stumble and bleed.

More came. Two, three, then five. You lose count. Counting is a luxury. All you see is movement. Sounds. Hands. Clenching teeth.

I pulled out my knife, and it felt like coming home to a burning house. You're not happy to be there, but you know the furniture.

One jumped straight at me, and his gaze wasn't evil, just intense. That's what made him dangerous. Evil men want to prove something to you. Intense men just want you dead so they can eat you.

He swung at my throat. I ducked, the saber slicing air, and the air almost slicing back. I kicked him in the knee, not hard, just right. His stance broke, he cursed, and in the curse lay the first thing that was human about him. I grabbed him by the collar, pulled him closer, and my knife found a spot between rib and liver where all are equal. He gasped, and his clean gaze suddenly turned very dirty.

He slumped, and his weight briefly pulled at my arm. Weight. Always weight. Everything on board is weight: wood, gold, fear, guilt, body.

The woman fought a few steps away, not like Tom, not like a soldier, more like a knife guiding itself. She didn't make wide arcs. She made small, precise lines. One of them reached for her and suddenly his fingers no longer had a proper grip. He stared at his hand as if she had betrayed him. A betrayal by hand is the only betrayal you believe immediately.

Briggs had remained at the helm, but he was no longer just the helm. He was the point where order could not be allowed to break down. He shouted orders, kept the ship from listing completely sideways, and at the same time kicked a boarding party so hard in the face that the man fell back over the railing like a bad decision.

And while all this was happening, while metal sang and men screamed and the sea below laughed, I suddenly felt this blow in my body, which didn't come like a blow from the outside, but like a tearing from within.

A saber had caught me. Not deep, not a clean cut, more like a diagonal slash across my side, between my rib and hip. I only noticed it when heat started seeping into my boot.

Warmth.

Blood is warm when it still belongs to you.

I cursed, not because it hurt – pain is old, pain is an old acquaintance – but because in that moment I realized: My blood is heavy. Heavy as lead, heavy as guilt, heavy as a sack full of damned coins you can never get rid of.

I pressed my hand against it, felt the stickiness, and I laughed briefly because it's so absurd: You can survive storms, you can survive traitors, you can dodge bullets, and then along comes some smartly groomed redcoat and cuts open your side as if he were cutting a loaf of bread.

“You’re bleeding,” Tom shouted, and his voice sounded almost offended, as if I had just told him I didn’t want to anymore.

"I'll die later," I growled.

Tom laughed once, briefly, that ugly, genuine laugh. "Tell it to the blood," he shouted, and disappeared again in a movement that reeked of madness.

I kept fighting. Not heroically. Functionally. Every punch, every step, every grip was suddenly connected to this new thing: the feeling that my body was becoming heavier, as if someone had poured sand into my veins.

A man approached me, and his saber slid across my blade, sparks. Sparks look beautiful when you're not dying. He pushed, I pushed back. He was strong, I was stubborn. Stubbornness is my last virtue.

I kicked him in the shin, he cursed, I pushed him away, and when he recovered, the woman was there and didn't slit his throat, but only took away his ability to keep fighting. He fell, clinging to the planks as if wood could comfort him.

"Don't stop," she said to me, quietly, as if it were an intimate recommendation.

"I am not standing," I said.

"Yes," she said. "You are getting there."

Slowly. That word hit me harder than a saber. Slowly means: you become a target. And targets are what bullets love, even if they don't know any legends.

I felt my legs grow heavier. My blood wasn't just leaking out, it was pulling me down. It was pulling me towards the deck, towards the sea, towards that big black mouth that had been whispering "come" all day.

A man in a redcoat tripped over a dead man, slipped, and in the slip he cried out for his mother. Really. Mother. It was almost funny. Almost. I wanted to laugh, because humor is a lifeline, but I had too much salt in my mouth, too much metal in my head.

Briggs yelled: "Take the hook off! Push it back!"

Men hooked, struck, and cut grappling ropes. A grappling hook chain snapped, and a redcoat fell into the water. He made no heroic noise. He only made that brief splash, and then he was suddenly small, a speck in a world that didn't know him. The sea knows no uniforms. It knows only weight.

I saw him struggling, and I thought: Perhaps this is the most honest punishment. Not hanging. Not shooting. Simply falling into nothingness and realizing that your king doesn't follow you.

Then another bullet came. Not from the cannons—more like a musket shot, a small, quick bang. And you realize immediately: bullets are back. Not big, not thunderous. Small. Personal. And yet, without legend.

A man next to me was shot in the shoulder, spun around like a drunken dancer, and fell. I heard his gasp, and I knew: if I think for even a moment too long now, I'll be the next one to fall and never get another song.

I pressed my hand harder against the wound, forcing myself to keep going. Step, step, step. I felt my pulse in my ears, that dull thumping: you're losing yourself, you're losing yourself, you're losing yourself. Blood isn't just liquid. Blood is time. And when it flows out, your time flows out with it.

"Back!" Tom suddenly yelled, and I saw him kick a boarding man in the stomach, so hard that the man flew backward over the edge. Tom looked at me, briefly, and in his eyes was something I rarely see in him: worry. Not a soft kind. Practical worry. Worry like: If you fall over, I'll have more work to do.

I wanted to say something stupid to him, something like "take care of yourself", but I only managed a dry sound because my mouth was suddenly too dry.

My blood was heavy.

It made things difficult for me.

And I realized: The sea doesn't have to grab me. I'm almost carrying myself away already.

You only realize how much you have when it starts to leave you. Blood isn't romantic. It's not a seal, an oath, a poem. Blood is simply your body's damn accounting. And when the numbers suddenly start flowing, even the biggest bastard starts doing quick mental math.

I forced myself backward, away from where the redcoats were most densely packed. Not out of cowardice. Out of common sense. Common sense is rare for me, but it emerges when the ground beneath you gives way. My hand was glued to the side, and every time I applied pressure, I felt the cut pulsate beneath it, as if mocking my stubbornness. The pain wasn't the problem. The problem was this dizziness, this faint flickering at the edge, as if someone had placed the world on a cheap wick.

A man approached me, our man, not theirs. His eyes were wide, and he held a saber that he probably hadn't even been able to hold properly five minutes earlier. "You're hit," he gasped, as if he'd just discovered that water is wet.

"I'm busy," I growled.

He took a step closer, as if to help, and I wanted to scream at him because, in a moment like that, help is often just another body in the way. The woman was faster. She grabbed the guy by the collar, pulled him away, and snarled, "Take cover. Or you're next."

The man obeyed immediately. Not because he loved her. Because her voice sounded like a call to action.

I leaned briefly against a post, breathing through my teeth. The sea roared beneath us, and the warship clung to us like a bad idea you can't shake. Men with muskets now stood atop the enemy's railing. Small cracks, small holes, big impact. This was the new phase: no longer just blades and hands, but distance that still managed to hit you. Distance is cowardice with technology.

"Down with the riflemen!" yelled Briggs.

Briggs didn't sound like panic. Briggs sounded like work. He kicked the hook out of a boarding party's hand, hit him so hard on the forehead with the butt of a pistol that the man staggered back, and all the while he still maintained his course as if he were personally forging a contract with the sea.

Tom ran past me, his knife red, his face wet, and he shouted something like a joke that nobody wanted to hear. Tom's such a bastard, he laughs even as he dies, just to show death that it won't steal the punchline from him.

I forced myself to move again. If you stand still, your body becomes honest. And honest means: it tells you how broken you are. So you move. Movement is a lie, but a useful one.

A redcoat leaped across, right in front of me, saw my hand at my side, probably smelled the blood like a dog. His saber rose, and I saw in his face that clean zeal that men have who believe they are doing something right. I hate that sort. Better a thief than a creditor.

He lunged. I turned, too slowly, and the blade grazed my arm. No big deal. But it was enough to make the blood pound in my head even louder. I kicked him in the chest, he stumbled, and I wasn't going for grace. I was going for the dirty. I pulled him toward me because hand-to-hand combat is the only place where you can truly shatter the Crown's order. His eyes widened as he realized that a uniform is no shield. My knife went in, short, hard, and he made that low, offended noise, like I'd just cut his pay.

He slumped, and his weight pulled at me, and I cursed because even dead people are work. I pushed him away, he fell, and I felt the cold sweat running down my back, even though I was wet from the sea. Cold means: You lose. Not the fight, but yourself.

"Tie that!" the woman yelled, suddenly standing next to me.

She pressed a piece of cloth into my hand. Not a clean cloth, just some scrap of shirt or sail, it didn't matter. Cloth is cloth when your body is full of holes.

"I can't—" I began, and I immediately hated myself for saying that.

"You can," she said. "Or you'll fall."

That wasn't comfort, that was mathematics. I pressed the fabric against the wound, wrapped it tightly, so tightly that I momentarily lost my breath. Pain flashed, bright, but it also helped. Pain is sometimes a stake that nails you to the present moment.

Up above, another musket cracked. A man on our side fell, not dead, but out of the game, and his scream was so full of surprise it made my stomach churn. Surprise is the last thing you can afford. Surprise is when you thought you were in control.

"Cut the boarding ropes!" shouted Briggs.

Axes chopped. Ropes creaked. Metal clanged. A grappling hook snapped, and two redcoats lost their footing, falling back onto their deck. One remained hanging, dangled briefly, screamed, and then broke free and disappeared among the ships. Not into the sea, but somewhere in between, where wood and water together grind you to dust.

I saw it, and I thought: That's how it ends for many. Not grand. Not beautiful. Just gone. And nobody has time to say your name.

My head felt lighter again, and that wasn't a good sign. Light means: you're sliding. I clenched my teeth and forced myself not to lose sight of the horizon. If you lose sight of the horizon, you become a point that falls.

Tom reappeared and grabbed my arm. "You look like shit," he said, and when Tom says that, he means it.

"You too," I growled.

He grinned briefly, but the grin didn't last. "If you fall over, I won't be able to get you up," he said.

"You can handle anything," I said.

"Not if it's heavy," Tom said, and his gaze went to my side. "Your blood is heavy."

I laughed dryly. "My blood was always heavy," I said.

"Then don't throw it away," he snarled.

Briggs yelled from above: "Push off! Now!"

The warship was too close. If they really pinned us down, it would turn into a meat grinder. We had to create some distance. Distance is life, even when bullets are flying. Distance at least gives you room to recharge, room to think, room to swear.

Men braced poles against the enemy ship's side, pushing, sliding, pushing again. Wood creaked. A boarding rope snapped. A hook splashed into the water. And the sea immediately snapped at it, as if it had been waiting for it.

I helped as best I could, pressed down with my shoulder, felt my vision go black, just a brief flicker. I breathed deeply, smelled powder and salt, and I realized: If I fall today, it won't be a beautiful fall. I'll simply topple over, and the world will keep roaring.

"Not yet!" the woman shouted.

"Still" is a good word. "Still" means: you're not finished.

We pushed. The ship groaned. Then, finally, there was a jerk, as if a knot had come undone. The warship drifted away a short distance. Not far. But far enough that grappling hooks couldn't immediately catch again.

"Cannons!" roared Briggs. "Give them a send-off!"

Our cannons spat. The smoke was thicker now, heavier, as if it were replacing the blood in the air. Over there, wood cracked. Men shouted. Part of their railing broke. It wasn't victory. It was just a moment when they realized: We are not merely prey.

I stood there, the bandage firmly in place at my side, and noticed how my heart finally found a bit of a rhythm again. Not calm. But not panicky. Work creates rhythm. Rhythm keeps you alive.

Tom looked at me. "You stay up top," he said.

"I'm staying," I said.

The woman gave a brief nod and went back to where she was needed. Briggs stayed at the helm as if he were bolted to the wood. And I stood there between smoke and water, thinking: Maybe that's my whole damn point. Not to be great. Not to be loved. Not even feared. But simply to stand still when everything else falls.

My blood was heavy.

But as long as it was still inside me, I was heavy enough not to be blown off the deck like a name no one remembers anymore.

Pushing off didn't save us. It only bought us air. Air is expensive at sea, and that air always contains the next price.

The warship drifted a few lengths away, just enough that its grappling hooks fell into empty air and its sabers could only cut at water. But now that there was distance, the cannons came into play again, and cannons are like old bills: they keep resurfacing until you pay.

Briggs shouted orders, the men loaded, the wicks glowed, and somewhere down below Hale kept pumping until his arms were probably nothing but pain. I couldn't hear the pump as clearly anymore, but I knew it was there. You eventually learn to hear things like that, like a second heartbeat.

I stood at the edge of the smoke, my hand at my side, the bandage tight like a curse. The blood still seeped out, slowly, but it seeped out. It was as if my body was saying: You can tie me up, but I decide when I leave you.

Tom stayed close to me, as if he were suddenly afraid I might collapse. That was new. Tom doesn't bond with people, except for those who take work off his hands. Maybe that was it. Maybe I was just a task he didn't want to lose. Or maybe he's not entirely made of stone after all.

"How much?" he asked.

"Enough," I said.

"That's not an answer," he growled.

"Then ask a doctor," I said.

Tom snorted. "We don't have a doctor."

"Then I'll just die like a poet," I said dryly.

Tom grimaced. "Poets die too slowly," he said.

He was right. I felt it in my head. This slow drifting away, not quite black, more gray. A fog that tells you: You could just sit down now, just for a moment, just a second. And if you sit down, you're lying down. And if you're lying down, you might not wake up again.

I stopped.

Briggs shouted: "Fire!"

Our cannons spat again. The recoil reverberated through the deck, and I felt the impact reverberate through my body as if I were part of the ship. Over on the warship, wood cracked. I saw a mast wobble, not fall, but wobble. Wobbling is hope for fools. Hope is dangerous. But a little of it sometimes keeps you upright.

Then came her answer.

The enemy volley wasn't large, not spectacular. It was precise. Two bullets flew low, one striking near the waterline, the other in the area where our rigging was already weakened. Wood splintered. A rope snapped. A sail hung even more limply.

"They're aiming for our bones," murmured the woman next to me.

"You know where it hurts," I said.

"They pay men to do it," she said.

The warship changed angle again. Not to escape. To aim more accurately. And that's when I understood: They're playing for time. They can afford to. We can't. We have a leak, wounded, a damaged steering system. And I myself was a problem with my pulse.

Briggs knew that too. I could see it in the way his hands held the wheel: no longer like a man who only loves direction, but like one who realizes that direction might not be enough now.

"We have to get out," I said to him when I was close enough.

Briggs' gaze remained forward. "Where to?" he asked.

"Away," I said.

Briggs' mouth twitched. "Away is not a direction," he said.

"Then invent one," I growled.

He glanced at me briefly, and there was something in his gaze that looked almost like respect. Almost. "You're losing blood," he said.

"I'll lose much more," I said. "If you keep being so stubborn."

He remained silent for a moment. And the silence was a decision.

"Smoke," Briggs said then.

"What?" asked Tom.

Briggs pointed at the barrels, at the pitch, at the oil, at everything that stinks and burns. "Wall of smoke," he said. "We're blocking their view."

Tom grinned again, finally. "Fire," he said. "Now we're talking."

The woman nodded, but her gaze was hard. "Fire will consume us too," she said.

"Then we'll feed it in the right direction," said Briggs.

Men ran out, fetched pitch, gathered oil-soaked rags, and prepared everything that would burn. Burning is a game you only play when you have nothing left but tricks. This wasn't a heroic victory. This was survival skill.

While they prepared this, the warship continued firing. Not incessantly, but regularly enough that you never forget death is at work. A bullet struck the railing again, tearing it open, and a man was hit in the leg by shrapnel. He cried out, fell, and his cry was so full of rage it was almost comical. Anger is sometimes the last thing you feel before you become empty.

I stepped forward, grabbed him, and pulled him into cover. He held my wrist tightly, as if trying to cling to it to keep from drifting away. "Don't... don't let me..." he gasped.

"I won't let you," I said, and I didn't even know if that was true. Maybe I let everyone down eventually. Maybe that's my talent: letting people down and still moving on.

He was pulled away, and I was left standing again because sitting was not an option.

The wall of smoke came. Burning rags were thrown into the water, followed by pitch, and the sea—that vast, arrogant thing—suddenly had to consume smoke. Black fumes rose, obscuring visibility, turning the world into a gray-black chaos. The warship fired once more, blindly, and the bullet went somewhere where it hit no one. Blindness is the only weakness of precision.

"Now!" yelled Briggs.

He jerked the wheel around as best he could. Men at the sails pulled, despite the damage, and the ship began to turn, away from direct view, away from the clean line of sight of their cannons.

The warship tried to give chase, but in the smoke, every ship is a rumor. And rumors can escape when the wind is on their side.

The smoke burned my eyes, my throat. I coughed, tasted soot and blood, and my head briefly felt lighter again. Not a good lighter. But I held on tight. To a rope. To the thought: Just get out.

Tom grinned into the smoke. "They can't see us anymore!" he shouted.

“They can hear us,” I gasped.

“Then let them hear it,” said Tom, and he roared something obscene in the direction of the invisible enemy, as if his curse would drive it away. Curses aren't weapons. But sometimes they feel like them.

We glided out of the smoke, slowly, then faster, as the wind caught us. Behind us you could still hear cannon fire, but farther away. Farther away is a beautiful sound. It sounds like a reprieve.

When the air finally cleared, I saw the crew. Faces blackened with soot, eyes red, hands trembling, but alive. Being alive is what matters. Everything else is a luxury.

Briggs was at the wheel, glancing back to check if they could still see us. Then back forward, because he couldn't help himself. Heading in the same direction, still.

I leaned against the mast because my body was finally saying: Enough. And I let it happen, just for a moment. My blood was heavy, yes. I felt it with every breath. But we hadn't sunk. We weren't trapped. We weren't executed.

We were just battered.

And being in a vulnerable state is when pirates become most dangerous. Not because they are brave, but because they have nothing left except what still flows within them.

I spat out black and red phlegm, saw it sticking to the planks, and thought: This is what my legend looks like. Not in songs. In soot and blood.

My blood was heavy.

But it was still there.

And as long as it was still there, there was still work.

The beard burned well

When the smoke finally cleared, the air was so clear it almost hurt. Clarity isn't always pleasant. Clarity shows you how many holes there are in the ship, how many men are missing, how many are still breathing, but already breathing differently, as if they have a crack somewhere inside that can't be mended.

I leaned against the mast because my body refused to play the proud one any longer. The cloth bandage on my side was wet and warm and smelled of iron. Blood has an honest smell. It doesn't pretend to be anything else. It's simply there, and it says: You're not made of stories, you're made of flesh. Flesh is flawed. Flesh is stupid. Flesh gets tired.

Tom stood next to me, staring at the water as if he could see the next fight breaking out. His knife was cleaner than it should have been. That scared me. Clean meant he'd found the time to wipe it. Time meant he felt safe. And safety is the sister of stupidity.

"We're still alive," he said, as if it were a joke.

"We still stink," I gasped. "That's proof enough."

He laughed briefly, dryly. Then he became serious again, which is rare for him. "They'll be back," he said.

"Of course," I said. "They pay people to come back."

Tom spat. "Then they should pay until their pockets burst."

I wish I could have sounded just as relaxed, but my stomach kept reminding me that I wasn't. Every breath tugged at the wound like a dirty hand. I looked down, saw the bandage, and thought: This is my anchor now. A piece of fabric and my willpower not to collapse like some drunken idiot.

Briggs held its course, but it was a different course. No longer that stubborn straight course, but one that said: I know I could die today. Briggs is a stone, yes, but even stones become smooth when water rubs against them long enough.

The team was silent. Not reverential. Not docile. Silent like after a car crash, when everyone briefly checks if they still have all their bones. Some looked at me, so quickly they hoped I wouldn't notice. They wanted to know if I was weakening. Men love weakness because it allows them to excuse their own.

I would have liked to throw some kind of rhetoric at them, something about judgment and curse and all that theatrical stuff I'm usually so good at. But I realized: words are too easy today. Today the ship needed something weighty. Something that would stick in their minds when the next bullet rings out.

Down below, Hale kept pumping. I heard the pump like a heartbeat, dull and steady. Each beat said: I'm not dead. Each beat also said: I'm no fucking hero, I'm just a man who's stepped too deep into his own shit to turn back.

The woman came up to me and held out a bottle. Water, not rum. She wasn't being nice about it, she was being practical. "Drink," she said.

"Water is for horses," I growled.

"Then don't behave like a donkey," she said, pressing the bottle to my lips.

I drank. The water was cold and tasted of wood, but it made my mouth a place again where words could even be formed. I hated that I needed to.

"You're turning pale," she said.

"I will become legendary," I said, and the sentence sounded like dirt even to my own ears.

She looked at me, and there was no mockery in her gaze. Only this stark truth: Legend is a garment you throw over a wounded body so no one can see how much you're trembling.

"You have to stand," she said.

"But I'm standing," I murmured.

"You have to stand the way you usually stand," she said. "The men can smell it."

She was right. Men smell weakness like dogs smell blood. And when they smell it, they start opening boxes in their minds that we had just slammed shut: greed, fear, betrayal. Keene sits downstairs, just waiting for someone to crack the door open again.

I pushed myself away from the mast, straightened my back as best I could, and it was like putting my own knife away again. Pain shot through me, but at least pain is honest. Pain doesn't lie to you. Pain simply says: This is the limit. If you cross it, you pay.

I walked across the deck, slowly but deliberately. Not in a way that looked like weakness. In a way that looked like a decision. Decision is the only makeup that will last on a ship like this.

The men made way, sometimes too quickly. I lingered by the cannons, saw the sooty barrels, the burnt wicks, the stench of gunpowder still hanging in the air like a curse you can't wash away. There was still smoke in my throat, and every time I coughed, I tasted soot and blood. A fine cocktail. One that reminds you you're still here.

Briggs stood at the wheel and said nothing. Briggs rarely speaks when he's observing. Observation is his language.

I went to the box where we kept the fuses, the detonators, all that stuff that burns when you want it to, and burns you if you underestimate it. I took a few pieces out, checked them, held them in my hand. Dry. Good. Dry means: They do their job when you tell them to.

Tom looked at me and grinned crookedly. "Do you want to play the devil again?" he asked.

"I never play," I said.

"Yes," he said. "You play all the time. You just play well."

I ignored him and took another piece. Then another. I felt his eyes. Men get nervous when you hold something they don't understand. Misunderstanding is also fear, and fear is... well, we know the saying.

The woman stood still and looked at me as if she were guessing what I was about to do. She guessed correctly. Of course she guessed correctly.

I went to the mast, where a gust of wind made the flag flap sharply for a moment. The flap sounded like applause, and I hated that my mind briefly thought: This is a sign. Signs are for fools. But even fools sometimes live longer if they believe in signs.

"Listen," I said. No shouting. Just a sentence that cuts through the silence.

The men watched. Some didn't want to, but they had to. You can't turn a deaf ear when someone is speaking who should have been dead three times over.

"You saw today that balls don't know names," I said. "They don't know shares either. No gold. No stories. They only know holes."

A few nodded as if it were news to them. People learn slowly.

"And you have seen," I continued, "that a warship does not hate you. It works. It works you away."

I spat because my mouth became dry again. Then I picked up the fuse pieces.

"This," I said, "is not courage. This is not honor. This is a damned tool that stinks and burns and keeps you awake."

Tom laughed softly. He now knew where I wanted to go.

I stuck the first pieces into my beard.

Not cautious, not elegant. Just straight in. The beard was thick, matted, reeking of salt and smoke and old hatred. It absorbed the stuff like a nest. Men flinched as if I were suddenly closer to them.

"What the hell...", one of them muttered.

"Exactly," I said. "To hell with it."

I took fire. Not a big fire. Just a small flame, so small that it laughs at you if you underestimate it. I held it by the ends.

The first sparks flew, and then the fuses glowed. Tentatively at first, then more intensely. Smoke rose into my face. It smelled of pitch, of sulfur, of that dirty truth that fire always brings: You're not safe. Not even in your own beard.

The men stared at me as if I'd just decided to throw my mind overboard. Maybe I had. Maybe that was the point.

I felt the warmth, pleasant at first, then sharp. I felt the smoke irritate my eyes. I felt my blood say with every heartbeat: You're an idiot. And yet I grinned, because I realized what it did to them.

They were afraid.

Not before Briggs. Not before Keene. Not before the Crown.

In front of me.

Before the image. Before the stench. Before the fire that burned so close to my skin that it could only be madness. And madness is sometimes the only language a team understands when everything else has already been burned.

"Remember this," I said, my voice rough with smoke. "If they come back... if they want to shoot you to pieces again... then they shouldn't think they're fighting men who are still fooling themselves."

I let the beard continue to smolder, a few sparks danced, and I saw even Tom swallow hard. Not out of fear. Out of respect. Tom only respects two things: pain that is voluntary, and madness that works.

The woman looked at me, and in her eyes was the only form of approval I ever received from her: a curt nod. Not "good." Not "bravo." Just: You built a weapon.

My beard burned well.

And the moment the smoke filled my nostrils and my side wound throbbed like a wounded heart, I knew: This isn't just for show. This is a signal. For the crew. For the crown. For the sea.

I'm still here.

And I am ready to set myself on fire before I let you extinguish me.

The glow in the beard was initially just a trick, a bit of smoke, a little bit of hell to go. Then it became real. Fire always starts out innocent and then becomes personal.

I stood there with the burning stuff on my face, feeling the heat slowly creep closer to my skin, as if whispering: You wanted theater? Here, now play the final scene. The smoke drifted into my eyes, and I had to blink because tears and pirates go together as badly as the Bible and a brothel. But the body does what it wants. The body has no interest in legends.

"Enough," the woman said, quietly, but loud enough for me to hear.

"Not yet," I growled, and the sentence came out like a cough.

The crew stared at me. Not all of them out of respect. Some out of sheer terror that I was about to burn like a damned pyre on deck, and then they'd have to run again, this time not from the crown, but from me. Some had that look you see in children when they think an adult is suddenly no longer in charge. When the adult goes berserk, children are on their own. And men, in moments like that, are like children, only with knives.

Tom grinned, but his grin was narrower than usual. "You stink," he said.

"I've always been a stench," I gasped.

"You are a burning stench," he said, as if it were a promotion.

I raised my head, keeping my gaze over the railing, in the direction from which the Crown would emerge when it caught our scent again. I thought of the warship, the clean uniforms, the small, precise holes. And I thought: If they find us, let them see this smoke first. Not as a warning. As an insult.

The heat intensified. The beard crackled, and the sound was so intimate it briefly made my stomach churn. Hair burns differently than wood. Hair burns like a secret that's been lingering in your mind for too long.

"Now," the woman said, this time not as a suggestion.

I looked at her, and there was no pity in her eyes. Only calculation. She knew: If I really set myself on fire now, the signal might be pretty, but the ship would lose its loudest bastard, and that's hard to replace.

I barely nodded, as if I were doing her a favor, even though she was saving my life. She pulled up a wet cloth, slapped it against my beard, hard, not gently, and the steam rose like a curse that cries out briefly before being stifled. It hissed. It stank. And it hurt like hell, because the heat had seeped into my skin like guilt.

I cursed, quietly, through my teeth, and I noticed the team flinch at the sound. They didn't expect me to be in pain. They expected me to pass judgment. Pain makes me human, and being human makes me vulnerable.

Tom gave a short laugh. "So you can feel after all," he said.

"I always feel," I growled. "I'm just pretending I don't care."

The woman pressed the cloth against my beard once more, and the last smoldering ember died. Smoke still clung to me, in my hair, on my face. I smelled like burnt animal. Perhaps I was.

I took a few steps so I wouldn't stand still for too long. Standing still is when the men start counting in their heads again: Who's hurt? Who's weak? Who might fall? And who'll fall next? I could feel the wound on my side throbbing; the bandage was wet again. My blood was still heavy. Now there was also the smell of burnt hair, as if my body had decided to bleed and grill me at the same time.

Briggs was at the wheel and glanced at me briefly. No comment. That was his comment.

"Smoke was good," he finally said, as dryly as if he were talking about the weather.

"Fire too," I said.

Briggs' gaze remained fixed on the horizon. "Fire consumes," he said. "You too."

"Then at least let it eat the fear first," I said.

He barely nodded. For him, that was almost a hug.

The crew was back at work. Repairs. Ropes. Pumps. Scraping away blood. Dragging the dead away. Making the ship act like a ship again, not a floating slaughterhouse. The problem was: after a day like that, the fighting spirit is in your hands. Men suddenly grip too tightly, tie knots too fast, pull too quickly. They're still in the zone. And that zone is dangerous because it blinds you to the subtle things.

And then this quiet thing came along.

A call from the lookout. Not a panicked one. Not a shout. Just a tone that sounds too controlled, as if control were now a curse. "Sails!"

The word made the air heavy again.

Briggs raised his head. "Where?"

"Behind the smoke. Further away," came the reply.

Tom spat. "They can smell us," he said.

"You can see us," the woman said.

I stepped to the railing and squinted. There was a line. A stain. A shape moving too slowly to be harmless. Warships don't move like merchants. Merchants are curious. Warships are safe.

My beard still smelled of fire, and suddenly I liked that smell more than rum. Rum makes you soft. Fire wakes you up.

"They'll be back," said one of the men, as if he had just discovered that the sky is above.

"Of course," I said. "You didn't think they were going to go home and cook themselves some soup just because there was a little smoke."

The team didn't laugh. Good. Laughter is dangerous these days. Today you need the kind of seriousness that's ingrained in your muscles.

"What do we do?" someone asked.

This question is at the heart of every mutiny, every betrayal, every foolish idea. What do we do? And who decides? If you don't answer this question, someone else will, with gold, or fear, or keene.

I looked at the men. Their faces were sooty, their eyes tired, their hands sore. A few had that look that said: Maybe it's over now. Maybe this is the point where I cease to be me and become just a falling body.

"We'll do what we always do," I said.

"And what is it?" asked the same man, sounding almost angry because he wanted a magical answer.

I moved closer so he could smell my burnt hair. The smell did something to him. He took a half step back. Good.

"We will remain ugly," I said. "We will remain awake. We will remain so damn uncomfortable that even the Crown will realize it is getting burned by us."

Tom grinned again, this time more broadly. "That sounds like work," he said.

"Everything is work," I said. "Even dying."

Briggs called the crew together. No long speech. Short orders. Adjust sails as far as possible. Clean the cannons. Check the powder. Pump. Keep pumping. The rhythm returned, and rhythm is the only comfort a ship knows.

I went back to the mast where the boy with the tar mouth was hanging. He looked at me with burning eyes. Not burning with fire. Burning with something he couldn't yet name.

"Do you see that?" I asked quietly.

He made that dull noise because his mouth still didn't really belong to him.

"That's how it is," I said. "You think you've been humiliated once and then it's over. But the sea and the crown and the men... they always give you more."

He stared at me.

"If you survive," I said, "you won't learn how to get clean. You'll only learn how to burn without falling."

I walked away because I realized my head was getting light again. Not a good kind of light. Dangerously light. And I thought: Maybe this is the beginning of something even stupider. Maybe the fire in my beard isn't just for show. Maybe this is the point where I stop pretending to be in control.

Perhaps I am now simply a man willing to set himself on fire rather than disappear into the water.

The beard burned well.

And the smell remained.

The new sail on the horizon was like a stain on a white shirt: small at first, then everything you stared at. You could ignore it, tell yourself it's probably a trader or a wisp of cloud, but your gut doesn't believe you. Your gut is an honest bastard. It never lies. It just says: This will come back. It always comes back.

Briggs adjusted the course slightly, without any fuss. A little more wind, a little less sight line, as if he could defy physics. I liked that about him. He didn't act like we were already dead. He acted like death was just another opponent with rules. I don't believe in rules, but I do believe in stubbornness. And Briggs was stubbornness personified.

My beard still stank. Burnt hair clings to you like a memory you can't shake. You smell yourself and think: So this is what the moment you decided you'd rather look crazy than weak smells like. I briefly stroked it, and it hurt. Not terribly, but enough that you can't forget it. Just right. Pain that keeps you awake.

Tom came over to me, chewing on something, probably his own lust for the next massacre. "If they want to go at it again..." he began.

"Then it's their turn," I said.

Tom grinned. "Then you'll burn again."

"I'm always on fire," I said.

"Yes," he said, and his grin narrowed. "Just not always on the outside."

The woman stood by the cannons, checking powder, wicks, and hands. She also checked faces, but she did so so discreetly that the men thought she was only looking at work. People rarely notice when they're being measured, as long as you make them feel busy.

Briggs shouted: "No one alone."

It wasn't just because of betrayal. It was because of panic. Panic likes to creep into one-on-one conversations, whispering in your ear that you have to save yourself, that you're better than everyone else, that you have a right. Rights are the beginning of shit. And shit doesn't sink, it always floats.

I went to the entrance and shouted down: "Hale!"

The pump stopped briefly, then I heard his gasping. "Yes?"

"You'll keep pumping until I tell you to stop," I shouted.

There was no cheeky reply. Just a hoarse "Yes."

Good. The man had finally learned that life doesn't work with plans, but with obedience to reality.

I went back up and looked towards the horizon. The sail was bigger. No trader. Traders don't approach like that. Tradesmen grope their way around like drunken men in a brothel, uncertain, hopeful. What was out there came like a judge who already knows what the verdict will be.

"Is it the same thing again?" someone asked quietly.

"It's never the same," I said. "It's just always the same ending if you do it wrong."

He swallowed and nodded, as if I had just sold him a new religion.

Briggs called for oil and pitch. More smoke. More dirt. We didn't have many tricks left, and when you only have two tricks left, you use them twice. That's a kind of belief, too.

Men hauled barrels, tore rags, soaked materials. Everything stank. It stank of work, of danger, of the moment you decide to set something on fire, even though you know perfectly well that fire never only consumes what you throw at it.

The woman came up to me and looked at my beard. "Not again," she said.

"Not my beard?" I asked.

"Not like that," she said.

I laughed dryly. "You want me to stay beautiful?"

She looked at me as if I were truly stupid. "I don't want you to fall over," she said. "You're a real stick right now. Sticks burn badly when they're still needed."

That was the closest thing to care I would ever get from her. I nodded because my mind was smart enough today not to argue when someone was right.

Tom raised an eyebrow. "You listen to her," he said, as if it were a scandal.

"I'll listen to anything that doesn't drain the blood from my body," I said.

"Boring," said Tom.

"Boring lives longer," I said.

He spat. "Unfortunately."

The sail was now close enough that you could see movement. A ship. Large. Not quite as sleek as the warship from before, but too tidy to be harmless. Perhaps a companion. Perhaps another hunting vessel. Perhaps simply another mouth of the Crown. The Crown has many mouths. It doesn't feed itself. It has others feed it.

"They will not wait," Briggs said.

"Neither do we," I said.

Briggs glanced at me briefly, and I sensed he wanted something from me without saying a word. A sign. Something to draw the men back together. Because after blood, smoke, and betrayal, a crew is like a rope that's already frayed. You can still use it, but you have to keep a constant eye on it, or it will snap in your hand.

I knew what he meant before he said it. And I hated that I knew, because it means: I'm already in that role. I'm not just a man. I'm an image.

I went to the mast, where everyone could see me. Not because I love myself. Because they need me, whether I like it or not. I raised my hand, and my beard smelled of smoke, and I felt the cut on my side throb, as if my body were protesting: Shut up. Rest. Die in peace. And I thought: No. Not today. Not as long as someone out there still thinks they can put me in a box like a coin.

"Listen," I said.

The men turned around. Even those who were soaking rags paused briefly. Attention is a fragile thing. You only get it with something that hurts.

"You saw how clean they are," I said. "How tidy. How self-assured."

A few spat as if cleanliness were something that made them sick in their mouths.

“You saw that they were bleeding,” I continued. “Not because we are noble. Not because we are right. But because we are dirty enough to hurt them.”

Tom grinned again. That was his anthem.

“If you think today that you’re just poor pigs on a rotten boat,” I said, “then you’re right. But poor pigs can bite. And when they bite, the dirt stays in your teeth.”

A few laughed, briefly, nervously. Good. Nervous laughter is fear that doesn't dare to flee.

I took a piece of the oily rag and held it up. The rag was dripping. It smelled of pitch, of foolish courage.

“Fire is no hero,” I said. “Fire is a bastard. But it works for whoever feeds it.”

I briefly held the rag to the tip of my beard, not to burn it, just close enough for the men to see how little distance there is between madness and decision. Smoke rose, a tiny puff, just enough. Just enough to put that image back in their minds: He would do it.

The woman said nothing, but I could hear her breathing. She was ready to suffocate me again if I went too far. That was her job. My job was to show them there was nowhere left to go.

“We give them smoke,” I said. “We give them filth. We give them fear.”

I dropped the rag, kicked it out before it could really catch. The trick is always: you have to get close enough to the fire for them to believe it, but not so close that you actually burn. Unless you really want to burn. Sometimes you do. Not today.

“And if any of you think you have to negotiate with the Crown again,” I said quietly, “then you are not negotiating with men. You are negotiating with bullets. And bullets don’t talk.”

Silence. Heavy silence.

Briggs nodded once. Then he turned away and barked orders as if it had just been another routine task. But I saw it in the men: they were together again. Not out of love. Out of fear. Out of image. Out of the stinking, burning thing I had put in their heads.

The foreign ship drew closer, the wind shifted, and the first rags were prepared. Smoke screen, again. Maybe it would work. Maybe not. But we had something they didn't: the will to set ourselves on fire, just so they would take a step back.

I stood at the railing again, breathing in soot and salt and my own burnt beard, and I thought: This is it. This is my curse. Not the flag. Not the name. Not the beard itself.

The curse is that I always have to choose fire, because it's the only thing that moves men when they otherwise fall apart.

My beard burned well.

And sometimes the smell alone is enough to keep a team going that would otherwise be ready to kneel.

I sank without remorse

The sail out there grew, and with it grew that feeling in my gut, which I now know like an old enemy: not fear. More like certainty. That cold knowledge that you can't run away forever, can't keep cheating forever, can't keep consuming smoke forever without eventually becoming smoke yourself.

We made our preparations as usual. Men hauled, knotted, soaked, cursed. Pumps down below. Cannons up top. Smoking gear ready. And through it all, that thin thread of normality that everyone pretends will hold. Normality is the biggest bluff on a ship with holes in it.

Briggs held his course, but I could see it in his shoulders: he was calculating. Not with numbers, but with possibilities. How much wind? How much timber? How many men still sane? How many hands still unbroken? And how much time until the sea says "come" again and you can no longer say no?

My bandage was wet again. The cut was pulling, my beard smelled burnt, and my eyes stung from the soot. I felt like a piece of wood left too long in the sun: dry, cracked, ready to break. And yet I went overboard, because standing still means thinking, and thinking means feeling that you're already tired.

Tom came to me, briefly placed his hand on my shoulder, as if checking if I was still real. With Tom, it was almost tender, and that made me angry, because tenderness at sea is just another name for goodbye.

"You will not die today," he said.

"You don't even know how to tie a shoe," I growled. "Why do you think you know anything today?"

Tom grinned crookedly. "Because you're too stubborn," he said. "Stubbornness keeps you afloat."

"Stubbornness makes you difficult," I said.

Tom shrugged. "Heavy is better than light," he said. "Light things fly away."

He was right. And yet, I had the feeling that I might fly away today. Not like a bird. Like a stone.

The woman approached me. She held out a new bandage, dry fabric, cleaner than anything else on the ship. "Change," she said.

"I don't have time," I said.

"You have less blood," she said.

I took the cloth because I didn't want to be stupid enough to die of pride. Pride is cheap. Blood is expensive. I pulled off the old bandage, and the pain was like a brief flash. Warm

blood seeped out immediately, as if my body were saying: Finally, air. I pressed the new cloth on, wrapped it, knotted it. Each knot was a small "still."

Briggs shouted: "They are changing course."

I went to the railing and squinted. The strange ship clearly intended to cut us off, not just pursue us. It wasn't coming head-on. It was coming at an angle, blocking our path. A hunter that doesn't chase, but encircles.

"Crown?" asked Tom.

"Crown," I said.

"How many?" the woman asked.

"Enough," I said.

"That's not an answer either," said Tom.

I spat. "Answers are for the land," I said. "Here, there's only reaction."

Briggs barked orders: Smoke ready, but not too soon. Cannons loaded, but not wasted. Keep pumping, no matter what happens up top. He wanted control of the moment. Control is his love song. But control is also a lie you tell yourself so you don't scream.

The alien ship didn't fire immediately. It kept its distance, as if observing us. Like a man who sizes you up before stabbing you. That made me more nervous than any cannon shot. A shot is honest. Waiting is strategy.

Then there was a bang. Not cannon fire. Muskets. Small, quick bangs that zipped across the water like flies. One of our men on the lookout fell as if someone had knocked him out. He slid down the railing, making a sound that wasn't even really a scream, more of an "oh," as if he'd just realized he'd been standing in the wrong place.

"Get down!" yelled Briggs.

Too late for the lookout.

The musket shots came faster. They were shooting at people, not wood. They wanted to weaken us before they got any closer. They wanted to tire us out. Tired people make mistakes, and mistakes are the best grappling hooks.

I ducked, feeling a whistling sound just above my head. Bullets are invisible until they're inside you. That's their joke.

Tom cursed, jumped forward, and pulled away a man who was standing frozen by a cannon. "Move, you idiot!" he yelled.

The man moved because Tom's voice is violence.

The woman pulled a wounded man to cover, quickly tying something around his arm, while a bullet smashed into the wood beside her. She didn't even flinch. I hated her for that composure. I loved her for it. Love is a shitty word here, but you know what I mean: that feeling of someone not collapsing beside you.

Briggs shouted: "Smoke!"

Men threw oil-soaked rags into the water and lit them. Smoke rose, black, thick, and foul-smelling. The wind carried it away, but not as beautifully as before. The wind was capricious, shifting, letting the smoke creep back onto the deck for a moment. We coughed, cursed, and blinked. Smoke is no friend. Smoke is just a bad relative you invite because otherwise you'd be alone.

The alien ship approached, now faster, because it realized we were in the smoke. It took advantage of the confusion. Clever. Neat. Shit.

"They're going for the battering ram!" someone shouted.

I saw it: The bow of the alien ship dipped slightly, as if it were lowering its head before impaling you. A ramming attack isn't elegant. It's brutal. Wood against wood, and everything in your gut crunches.

"Halt!" yelled Briggs.

As if you can hold the sea.

We tried to swerve, but the steering wheel was damaged, the response sluggish. The ship was turning too slowly. And the moment I realized we couldn't make it, I felt something strange: calm. Not peace. More like acceptance, like when you finally stop fighting the hangover after a long night of drinking and just lie down.

The impact came. A horrible crash, as if two worlds were knocking each other's teeth out. The deck vibrated, men fell, cannonballs rolled, someone screamed, wood snapped somewhere. I hit my shoulder against the mast, pain flashed, and my bandage tore a little. Warm blood again. Heavy.

Water rushed in immediately. You don't hear it at first. You feel it. A new weight. A deeper stance. A different breathing of the ship. As if it suddenly had water in its lungs.

"Lick it big!" yelled someone from below.

"Pump!" Briggs shouted, but his voice now had an edge I hadn't heard before. Not panic. More like anger at physics.

Hale pumped. Of course. But you don't pump against a big leak, you pray. And we had gotten used to not praying.

The alien ship was now right next to us, entangled, wedged. Grappling hooks flew. Men leaped. More sabers. More hands. Again that sordid proximity, where you see faces before you destroy them.

Tom leaped forward, roaring like an animal, and the animal inside him was happy. The woman walked calmly, cutting, stabbing, moving like a shadow. Briggs stayed at the helm, but I saw: he knew. He knew that this time the fight wasn't just about men, but about life.

I felt the water in the ship's hull, this new, cold life spreading. The sea wanted to keep me. It never gave up. It's just waiting for the moment when wood gives way and people grow weary.

I drew my knife, raised my head, saw the redcoats, saw the invaders, saw the chaos. And inside me was this feeling I'd never allowed myself: not regret. More like a dry "finally." As if I'd been drinking towards this moment all along.

If you live like that long enough, going under no longer feels like punishment. It feels like the end.

And I knew: If I fall today, I will not beg for mercy. I will not cry out to God. I will not think of the crown, not of gold, not of a woman who could have saved me.

I will simply sink.

Without regret.

The boat took on water as if it had finally decided to be honest. No more of that annoying little trickle you stuff like a bad thought. This was a mouth. A real one. Cold and greedy. You could almost hear the ship swallowing.

Below, men were screaming, but their screams already sounded muffled, as if the water would swallow them instantly. Pumping is a joke when there's a gaping hole in your gut. Pumping is just movement to keep you from collapsing inside. Hale was probably still pumping because by then Hale was a man made up of nothing but "yes" and muscle spasms. And somewhere in that absurd scene—boarding struggle above, drowning below—I thought: This is the perfect world for a bastard like me. Everything at once, everything unfair, everything loud. No time to feel sorry for yourself. The sea doesn't even give you the dignity to be sad.

The enemy ship clung to us, entangled like a disease. Men jumped across, cleaner than we were, and yet I saw the same crap in their eyes: fear, anger, duty, the stupid need to be able to claim at the end of the day that they'd been on the right side. Right. As if there were any side at sea that wouldn't eventually sink.

Tom walked in like an open wound. He punched, kicked, stabbed, and roared. An boarding party raised a saber; Tom ducked, rammed his head against the railing as if driving a nail. The man made a noise somewhere between "mother" and "shit," and then he was just a body taking up space. Tom kicked him out of the way because Tom can't even stand dead people lying around.

I no longer fought elegantly. I fought like someone who knows the clock is no longer ticking, but already falling. Every blow was less "I'm winning" and more "I'm taking you with me, you prim and proper lecher." I landed a blow on the forearm, his saber fell, I grabbed him, shoved him back onto the enemy deck, and he tripped over one of his own. Order tipping into chaos is the most beautiful song a pirate knows.

The woman was there, but I could barely keep her in sight. She was movement. She was that kind of cruel calm that shows you some people don't see survival as a gift, but as routine. She cut a man's wrist tendon, not out of sadism, but because it was faster. The man stared at his hand as if it were suddenly foreign, and I had to laugh briefly, even though the water in the ship's hold was already on my mind. Hand alienation—that's the only mystery soldiers truly know: that the body no longer obeys.

Briggs shouted orders, but they grew shorter. Not because he ran out of words, but because he ran out of time. "Hook out!" – "Hold the rudder!" – "Pump!" – as if an order were magic. Briggs is a man who believes that the right tone of voice sets the world in order. And sometimes that's true. Not today.

The deck tilted slightly. Not much. But enough for your feet to notice. Your balance is the first thing to tell you: We're screwed. Your head doesn't want to believe it yet, but your ankles believe it immediately.

"Water's rising!" someone shouted from below, and I heard the sound of water creeping up a staircase. It's a shitty sound. It sounds like an animal taking its time because it knows you can't go anywhere.

A redcoat jumped over to me, and he looked as if he'd never smelled in his life. He smelled of cloth and soap and false security. I almost ripped his teeth out for it, but I only pricked him once because I didn't have time for art. He gasped, stumbled, and before he fell, he looked at me as if he wanted to say something. Perhaps: Why. Perhaps: You're only human. Perhaps: I just wanted my wages.

I said nothing. I let him go. Not out of mercy. Out of laziness.

My bandage tore again a little, and warm blood flowed. I felt my body making every movement more expensive. My blood was heavy, and now it wasn't just heavy, it was also scarce. You don't notice scarcity like hunger. You notice it like fog. The fog doesn't settle on the world, but on you.

Tom grabbed my arm and pulled me back a step as a musket shot from across the way splintered the plank next to my foot. "You're slow," he snarled.

"You are ugly," I gasped back.

He grinned briefly, but the grin was just a reflex. "Ugly swims," he said.

"I don't swim," I said.

Tom stared at me as if I had just said I don't drink rum. "What?" he yelled.

"I don't swim," I repeated. "I'm too heavy."

He wanted to object, but then there was that deep, evil thump from the ship's belly again, and even Tom stopped talking. Wood giving way. Wood is afraid too. Wood doesn't creak because it's tired. It creaks because it stops lying.

Briggs shouted: "Break yourselves! Get away from them!"

Away. This time the word was truly panic, disguised as a command. Men hacked grappling hooks, cut ropes, kicked away hands that tried to grab hold. One of our guys managed to free a hook, but the hook ripped a piece of railing with it. The railing fell, and the sea below was suddenly closer. Too close. Always too close.

I looked down the stairs, and there stood Hale, having reached the top, soaking wet, his eyes empty. Not empty like death. Empty like he'd been pumped dry. He'd left the pump. That means: It's over. Or he's gone mad. Both are bad.

"It... it's not possible," he gasped.

Briggs looked at him, and for a moment I thought Briggs was going to hit him. Not out of anger. On principle. But Briggs didn't. Briggs's gaze was like a locked shop: empty, cold, finished.

"Then it won't work," said Briggs. Those were perhaps the three most honest words I've ever heard him say.

The team heard it. Not all of them. But enough. And you could feel something shifting. Not towards mutiny. Towards finality. People change when they understand that the reckoning is truly coming. Some suddenly fought like animals trying to escape a trap. Others fell silent, as if silence were a last vestige of dignity.

I stood there, amidst the smoke, the blood, the smell of burnt beard and wet wood, and I realized that nothing surprised me anymore. The sea wanted to keep me, yes. But maybe at some point I also wanted to stop making excuses. Maybe I was tired of all the nights when you pretend the next morning is safe. Nothing is safe. Not even your own anger.

An enemy officer—I recognized him by his posture, by that "I am more" smell—yelled something about "surrender," and I laughed. I really laughed, a hoarse, mangy laugh, because that's the stupidest request you can make to a man like me.

"Surrendered?" I gasped. "To whom? To the water?"

The officer didn't understand. Of course not. He raised his saber. I raised my knife. And in that moment, I felt the ship sink even deeper. Not quickly. Just noticeably. As if it were settling. As if it were lying down in its own grave.

My balance became strange. The ground no longer wanted to be ground. The planks felt as if they had suddenly decided they would no longer support me. And I understood: This is it.

I wasn't looking for gold. I wasn't looking at the flag. I wasn't even looking at Tom.

I looked into the water.

Black. Wide. Calm, even though it had just killed us. The sea kills without expression. It is the most honest face I have ever seen.

And I thought: Okay.

Not "what a shame." Not "if only I had." Not "what if." These are thoughts for people who can afford a beautiful ending.

All I had was this: wood that gives way. Blood that is heavy. And a life that snapped at me for so long, until I was finally quiet enough to be snapped at.

The ship made that final sound, which wasn't really a sound, more of a feeling: a yielding in its belly, a sigh in the wood, as if saying: I've carried you long enough, you ungrateful swine. Then it tilted a little more, and suddenly everything was crooked. Not dramatically crooked, not "it's about to capsize" crooked. More like that slow, sulky crookedness that shows you physics has patience and you don't.

Water ran over the planks, first in thin streams, then like a decisive act. It no longer crept. It took. It took what it wanted: ropes, crates, blood, shoes, names. The sea makes no distinctions. It takes the clean-cut officer just as much as the drunken deckhand. That is its only fairness, and it is brutal.

The officer in front of me raised his saber as if he still believed he was making the rules. I looked into his face, and I saw the moment he realized that his warship, his king, his reward—all of it was now very far away. Now he was just a man on a sloping deck above a black maw. His eyes flickered, and there it was at last: fear. Not the fear of me. The fear of the water. The good kind of fear. The honest kind.

He lunged. My body reacted, not because I'm a hero, but because I've survived so long that reflexes are the only friends I have left. I flicked the blade aside, kicked him in the hip, and he slipped. Water and blood on wood is like grease for the dying. He flailed, searching for something to hold onto, and in that searching, suddenly nothing about him was clean anymore. No poise. No "I'm better." Just a man who doesn't want to fall.

"Fuck you," I muttered, not as an insult, more as a comment on the situation, and plunged my knife into him, quickly, flatly, without any finesse. He gasped, his hand released the saber, and the saber slid away, clanged, almost disappeared into the water, as if the sea had said: Thanks, I'll take that one too.

He didn't even fall spectacularly. He simply buckled, landed in the shallow water, and his uniform soaked up water like a sponge. Cleanliness becomes difficult when it gets wet. I watched as he tried to get up, but his body was already no longer listening. He was too surprised that dying doesn't come gracefully.

Behind me, Tom yelled something, and I heard metal clanging against wood, someone shouting, someone laughing. Tom sometimes laughs precisely when he should be howling. I turned briefly and saw him: wet hair, knife red, face like an animal finally in its element. He kicked one encroacher away, ripped another's weapon from his hand, and as he did, he looked at me, just for a second. And in that second, there was no joke anymore.

"Come on!" he yelled.

Come. The word wasn't friendly. It was a grab. An attempt to seize me and yank me from the sinking timber like a bottle from a drunkard's hand.

I looked at him and knew what he meant: over to the strange ship, into the crowd, out of the water. Survival. Onward. One more day.

And I realized how little that appealed to me.

Not because I'd suddenly become refined. Screw refined. But because a weariness had taken root in my body, deeper than any wound. A weariness that doesn't cry out for sleep, but for an end. You can scream at the sea, at men, at bullets, at yourself for years, and eventually your voice just gives out. Then all that's left is this silent: I don't want to run anymore.

"Go away!" I yelled back.

Tom stared at me as if I'd just knocked his rum away. "What?" he yelled.

"Go!" I repeated. "You're fast. You're ugly enough to still be alive. Do it."

He took a step toward me, but the deck continued to tilt, water lashed up, and a grappling hook snapped shut somewhere, as if the dying ship were still trying to take someone with it. Tom cursed, looked left, then right, and I saw: he was doing the math. Tom never does the math. But now he was.

The woman appeared beside me, as always, quietly, precisely. Her gaze immediately went to my side, to the bandage, to the blood, to my eyes. She saw the truth in me without me having to say a word.

"No," she said.

That wasn't begging. That was an order. A dry, angry one.

I grinned because I couldn't help myself. "Yes," I said.

She grabbed my arm. Firmly. Not firm like Tom. Firm like someone who doesn't argue when things get heated. "You're coming," she said.

"I'm already on my way," I said, nodding towards the water.

She didn't hit me in the face, but I could see she wanted to. "You're a fucking idiot," she said, and finally she didn't sound calm.

"Yes," I said. "And?"

She shook her head, and there was something in her gaze that I didn't want to name. Perhaps anger. Perhaps respect. Perhaps simply the realization that some men cannot be saved because they have always seen themselves as their own downfall.

Briggs was still standing at the helm, even though the helm was now just a piece of wood pretending to control something. He didn't look at us for long. He looked at the water. He looked at the horizon. Then he glanced at me briefly, and there was no plea in his gaze. Only a silent understanding, which felt like a shrug from the world.

"Go!" he shouted to the team. "Over!"

Men ran, stumbled, jumped. Some made it. Some didn't. One slipped, fell against the railing, and simply vanished as if someone had erased him. No scream. Just a splash, and then there was only water. You can't even be sad when death works so fast.

Hale stood at the bottom of the stairs, his eyes empty. He saw me, and I saw in him this man who wanted to live and then betrayed others and then bailed and now understood that sometimes life still isn't enough. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something. Perhaps "Sorry." Perhaps "Thank you." Perhaps "Please."

I raised my hand, just briefly. No blessing. No judgment. Just a sign: Do what you must. He nodded, as if I had just allowed him to be human again, and then he stumbled toward the other deck.

Tom was still there, still. The bastard. He grabbed me by the collar and pulled me a step. "You're coming now," he growled.

I smelled his breath: blood, rum, fear. I looked into his eyes: a man who would never admit to being in pain, and who was in pain right now.

"Let go," I said.

"Fuck you," he said.

"It's already happened," I said dryly. "For years now."

He laughed briefly, but the air in the laugh was thin. "You can't just—"

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly what I can do."

I think he wanted to hit me. Not out of hatred. Out of desperation. But at that moment a wave came, and the deck tilted even more, and water shot up to our ankles, then to our calves. Cold. Heavy. The sea doesn't grasp you like a hand. It grasps you like a judgment.

Tom let go of me because he had to, otherwise he'd fall himself. He cursed, looked at me one last time, and in his gaze was this final: Come on, you bastard. Come with me.

I nodded at him. Not in agreement. As a farewell.

The woman stood next to me for a heartbeat, then turned away, either because she couldn't or wouldn't look. She jumped over, quickly, cleanly, and was gone. Tom jumped after her, and I saw him turn around once more as he landed, as if hoping I'd change my mind.

I didn't think about it.

I stood there, alone, with the stinking beard, the heavy blood, the bandage that was growing warm again. The ship sank beneath me, slowly, like a tired dog finally lying down. I heard wood creak, ropes snap, somewhere a final metallic clang. The flag flapped once more in the wind, then hung limp, as if it too had had enough of the spectacle.

The water rose to my knees, to my hips. Its cold cut into the wound, and I gasped. Pain flashed, but it was small compared to what was happening in my mind: silence. No plans. No curses. No legend. Just silence.

I looked towards the horizon, where the world goes on, whether you're there or not. I looked at the enemy ship, where men shouted and pulled and played at maintaining order. I looked at our deck, which was now more water than wood.

And I felt something I rarely feel: relief.

Not because I wanted to die like a romantic fool. But because I finally didn't have to pretend I was in control anymore. Because I finally didn't have to hold the image anymore. No more beard, no more curse, no more name. Just a man who fought for too long and is now stopping.

The water rose to my chest. It pressed down on me, heavy as my blood. It was as if the sea were saying: Come on. You've screamed long enough.

I breathed one last breath of air that tasted of smoke and salt. I didn't think of gold. I didn't think of God. I didn't even think of those who had jumped across. Not out of cold. Out of clarity. Everyone goes their own way. Mine led downwards.

I let myself sink, not dramatically, not with a final curse, not with a grand flourish to a song. Just like that. My body yielding, my eyes open, the water cold as truth.

And as the blackness enveloped me, I realized: Regret is a luxury for people who can still talk tomorrow.

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