

SCHINDERHANNES

The Bastard from Hunsrück



Michael Lappenbusch

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The Bastard from Hunsrück

The world never asked for him to come. No one asked for it. No solemn ringing of bells, no blessed miracle beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary. No. It was a filthy stable somewhere in the Hunsrück, cold as the teeth of death, stinking of manure, sweat, and wet earth. A maid, who had too much bad luck in life and too little bread in her stomach, writhed down there in the straw. Between the hooves of the cows, which chewed indifferently, as if nothing were unusual.

That's how he came out. Not a cry for hope, but a wild, defiant roar. Not the sweet chuckle of an innocent angel, but a sound that made it clear to everyone: No one grows up here who politely greets the priest. The mother screamed too, but it was more of a curse than a scream. As if she'd known from the very first second that this child wouldn't make her life easier, but only harder, bitterer, more fucked up.

The father? Forget the father. A servant, a whoremonger, a cowardly bastard himself, who ran away as soon as he saw the bill. He hammered his thing into the maid like one hammers a rusty nail into an old board, and took off before the beer was even cold. That was all. No name, no protection, nothing at all. Leave a hole and then disappear.

The child lay there, naked in the dung, while the mother tried to wipe it with a tattered rag. No doctor, no midwife, just an old neighbor who knew a little bit about delivering calves. She rubbed the little one with cold water that was more mud than water, laughing toothlessly: "Well, he won't make a farmer like that. He'll only cause trouble."

And he was causing trouble even before he could walk. He didn't scream like other children. He bellowed. Like an animal that hates the chains it's been put in. The cows got nervous, the dog barked, the mother cried—and somewhere outside, the wind laughed because it knew a real bastard had just been born. Not a bastard in the sweet sense, but a real one. A bastard who would give the world the middle finger as soon as he could raise it.

The first few nights were cold. Frost settled on the roof, and the child screamed its head off. The mother pressed it to her breast, but she had hardly any milk, just a few drops, bitter and thin. So it screamed on until the neighbors knocked and yelled for her to "finally shut that screamer up." But she couldn't. She couldn't do anything. The bastard wanted to live. Not still, not quietly. He wanted to let the world know right from the start: Here I am, you swine, and I'm not leaving.

The stench of manure, cold smoke, and poverty was his first cradle. No golden ring, no nursery rhyme. Just the Hunsrück, rough and hungry, and a boy who, at birth, fell not into a family, but into a hole from which he had to claw his way out.

At some point, he opened his eyes. Dark, sinister, almost black. Eyes that didn't shine like baby eyes, but like two small pieces of coal waiting to become a flame. Anyone who looked at him then swore later that he had that same look even as a newborn: hard, angry, full of defiance. Not an "Oh, how sweet." More of a "Watch out, or I'll bite your fingers off."

His mother called him Johannes. Many people in the village called him that. But no one said it warmly. They said "Hannes," like someone coughing. And when they learned he had no real father, they immediately called him what he was: a bastard. And that word etched itself deep into his little chest, even before he understood what it meant. It became his first nickname, his first truth.

And while the night howled outside, while the stove had long since gone out and the rats peered through the holes in the roof, the little bastard from the Hunsrück lay there, in the straw, with a cold bottom and a hot anger, and knew—if not consciously, then with every fiber of his little body—that he wasn't here to be loved. He was here to fight. To eat. To survive.

There are children who grow up with fairy tales, sweets, and a warm oven. And then there are the others. Those who learn the ropes from the very beginning, even before they know the alphabet. Hannes belonged to the second type. He was actually the prime example.

The mother was tired, broken, worn out. No man in the house, no money in her purse, no food in the pot. Perhaps deep down she loved him, but if you have to choose between hunger and love, then in the Hunsrück, hunger usually wins. So he got beaten when he was too loud. Beaten when he wouldn't stop screaming. Beaten when he snatched the last bite of bread before she could have it. Beaten with a wooden spoon, beaten with the flat of the hand, sometimes with her fist, if she had too much anger in her stomach.

And things weren't any better outside. Other children didn't like him. He was the bastard who grew up without a father. In a village where everyone knows everyone, that was like a brand on your forehead. The others laughed, threw stones, pulled his hair. They called him "Swine John," "son of a bitch," or simply "filth." Children can be cruel, but the adults stood by and grinned. Because secretly, they thought the same thing.

This is how Hannes learned that you have to bite with your teeth when your fists aren't enough. He was still small, but he fought back. Not always successfully—usually he lay bleeding in the dirt, his lip split, his nose covered in snot and blood. But he got up. Again and again. A dog you can kick as often as you want, and who will still attack you at some point when you least expect it.

The cold was a constant companion. In winter, it crept under the rags he called clothing. His shoes were full of holes, his fingers blue, his stomach empty. Sometimes he had to beg the dogs for scraps. He poked through scraps, looking for a turnip someone had thrown away. And if he was lucky, he'd find something that wasn't completely rotten. Then he'd shove it into his mouth as if it were a feast, grinning with black teeth.

It was a childhood in which one understood early on: Those who are soft die. Those who show emotion lose. Hannes learned faster than the others that you have to swallow your pain like cheap liquor. That you have to hold your head on the line until it becomes hard as a stone. That you can't wait for someone to help you—because no one ever comes.

And precisely in this harshness, something grew within him. Not pity, not compassion, but rage. A rage he couldn't yet control, but which burned in his bones. A rage that later, much later, would make entire cities tremble.

But now he was just a child. A bloody, beaten, starving bastard who lay awake at night, whispering into the darkness, "You won't get me." And even if he didn't say it, just thought it, just felt it – it was already there. The seed of everything that was to come.

The people in the village weren't better people. They were just better at hiding their shit. Behind Bible verses, behind crooked crosses on the walls, behind their clean aprons and smug faces. But Hannes saw it early on: They smelled of the same shit as everyone else, they coughed the same poverty, they sweated the same filth. Only they thought they were better because their children had a father who hadn't run away.

When Hannes walked through the alleys, he felt the stares. Those stares that were heavier than stones. As if his every step disturbed the order. As if his mere breathing was an insult. The women whispered behind their scarves: "There he goes, the bastard." And the men snorted into their pipes, spat on the ground, and said: "He'll never amount to anything, except a hanging rope."

He was young, but he understood more than they thought. Every word stuck in his head like a rusty nail in rotten wood. And he realized: These people would never accept him. Never. No matter how hard he worked, no matter how obediently he nodded, no matter how often he tipped his cap – they would always see him for who he was: the bastard in the dirt.

So he began to hold up a mirror to them. Not consciously, not planned—simply out of spite. When the village elders spoke pathetically about morality after Sunday mass, he secretly stuck his tongue out at them. When the children were dutifully learning psalms, Hannes sat outside, put a dead beetle in his mouth, and grinned. He felt: He didn't fit in this world. And this world didn't fit him.

The old men said he had "the devil in his eyes." Perhaps they were right. Because every time he was beaten, every time he was spat on or laughed at, his pupils burned as if he wanted to set the whole damned Hunsrück world ablaze.

The only warmth he sometimes received was from the village servant, who slipped him a little schnapps when he brought wood. But even he didn't do it out of kindness, but because he wanted to see the little bastard stagger and vomit afterward. A cheap spectacle in a dump where nothing was happening.

Hannes became a kind of living target. Everyone spat, everyone laughed, everyone hit him—but deep down, they were afraid. Because they sensed that something lurked inside this child that wasn't so easily broken. They sensed that this bastard could become something bigger, more dangerous, and uglier than anything they had ever known.

And when they locked the doors at night and extinguished the candles, when the wind howled through the cracks, some of them thought quietly, quite secretly: Perhaps we should have drowned him when he was born.

But by then it was already too late.

There comes a point in every life where you decide: Do you continue to eat the filth they throw at you, or do you start biting back? For Hannes, the moment came early. Ten years old, ragged as an old fart, barefoot in a world full of boot-wearers. And he decided: If the world only gives him shit, then he'll just start throwing shit back.

His first weapon was a knife. Not a beautiful, brightly polished piece, but a rusty kitchen steel, half blunt, half sharp, but a sword for a boy like him. He

stole it from his mother, who hardly ever cooked with it anymore anyway, because there was nothing to cut except turnips and rats. He held it in his hands like a sacred relic. Finally, something that made him strong. Finally, something that belonged to him.

And then the first opportunity came. An older boy, fat as a pig, pulled his ear again, laughing at the "fatherless one." Hannes turned around, his eyes black as coal, and drew the knife. It wasn't a big cut, no attempted murder—just a quick, furious scratch across the fat man's arm. Blood dripped, the fat man screamed, and the whole village listened.

From then on, Hannes was no longer just the bastard. He was the bastard with the knife. They still spat, they still laughed—but now there was this tiny bit of fear in their voices. Fear that the little bastard might one day slit their throats.

Hannes felt something stirring inside him. A warmth, almost like pride, but darker. He had seen the blood, and he had liked it. Not like a game, not like the pranks of the other children—but like a truth. He understood that violence gave him power. And he was addicted to it, even before he knew what addiction was.

From then on, he sought opportunities. He stole bread from the church, just to hear the priest curse. He peed on the wall of the schoolhouse while the other children learned psalms. He laughed in their faces when they made the sign of the cross with clean hands. He knew they hated him. So he gave them reasons to hate him even more.

His mother screamed, hit him, cried. But it was too late. Hannes was already on the path he would never leave again. A path of defiance, of blood, of pure rebellion. He didn't want to belong. He wanted everyone to see: He's different. He's worse. He's dangerous.

And at night, when he lay alone in the straw, he held the knife to his chest, felt the cold blade, and whispered: "They'll all see what becomes of me."

It wasn't a promise. It was a threat.

The village pub was the heart of the Hunsrück—if you confuse heart with a rotten, fly-infested liver. A low building, the windows covered in dirt, the smoke inside so thick that you were blind after three steps. For the men, it was church, confessional, and slaughterhouse all rolled into one. For Hannes, it was a playground.

He was still a child, but he sneaked in whenever he could. Through the toilet, through the back door, through a hole in the wall. And as soon as he was inside, he inhaled the air like a junkie inhales his first fix. This mixture of cheap liquor, cold roast, sweat, urine, and vomit—that wasn't a stench to him. That was home.

The men sat around the tables, shouting, playing cards, and rolling dice. Some cursed, others laughed; one was slapping his wife as she tried to serve the beer. For Hannes, it was all normal. He ducked under the benches, stole a piece of bread that had fallen down, or took a sip from an unattended mug.

The first time he drank beer, he was maybe eleven. He tipped the rest out of a mug left behind by a drunken coachman. It was warm, stale, full of foam and saliva. But it burned his throat like firewater, and he grinned. He understood immediately why the men suffered from the stuff like saints suffer their holy water. It made everything easier. The hunger, the beatings, the cold. It made the world a little more bearable.

And then he heard the stories. Because when the men were drunk, they talked. About thefts, about fights, about petty mischief with the neighbor's wife. Hannes listened. Every lie, every boast, every half-truth. It was his school. He couldn't read or write—he could barely do either. But he learned how to cheat, how to bluff, how to steal, how to hit.

Sometimes they noticed him. "There, that bastard is lurking around again." Then they'd get a kick, sometimes a slap with the palm of their hand. But never so serious that he wouldn't come back. Because he knew: In here lay the key to everything he wanted to be. Toughness, courage, freedom. The bar was his classroom, and the teachers were drunks and thugs who were unintentionally preparing him for the life he would later lead.

And every time he crawled back into the straw at night, his head dizzy from the smoke and his lips still bitter from the beer, he whispered: "This is my world. Not church. Not school. Here."

The pub became to him what fairy tales were to other children. Except that in his version, the princes smelled, the princesses were cross-eyed, and the happy endings usually ended in a fight under the table.

It was inevitable. When you grow up as a bastard in a small town in the Hunsrück, the day comes when you not only take blows, but also dish them

out—and see the first real blood. Not a scratch from a rusty nail, not a split lip after a fight, but blood you've drawn yourself.

It was summer, dusty, hot, the sun burning down on the villages like a cursed executioner. Hannes was twelve, maybe thirteen. Old enough to wield a knife, young enough not to know what would happen next. A boy from the neighboring village, taller, stronger, full of milk, made fun of him. "Son of a bitch," he said. Not the first time, not the last—but this time it was different.

Hannes still had the knife in his pocket. The old kitchen knife he never let out of his sight. And this time he didn't just pull it out to scare people. He pulled it out to do it.

It happened quickly. A stab, in the side of the arm, just below the shoulder. Not a deep, fatal cut—just enough to make the blood spurt immediately. Thick, red, warm. The boy screamed like a slaughtered pig. The other children shrieked and ran away as if they'd seen the devil.

And Hannes? He stood there, knife in hand, blood on his fingers, and he grinned. Not out of joy, not out of malice—but out of something deeper. He felt the world changing. How he himself was changing. Violence was not just a tool. Violence was a promise. Violence made him bigger, louder, more dangerous.

The boy bled, people screamed, and later his mother screamed and nearly beat him to death. But Hannes didn't care. He had understood something no beating had ever taught him: blood was power. And power was the only thing he ever wanted.

He couldn't sleep that night. He could still smell the blood, as if it were stuck to his hair. He held the knife tightly in his hand and thought, "This is just the beginning."

And he lay there, in the dark, while the dogs barked outside, and laughed softly. For the first time, he truly laughed. Not defiantly, not out of hunger, but out of this feeling that he had finally found something that belonged to him.

He didn't know what it was called. But later, much later, he would see it this way: The first blood was the first proof that he was destined for another life. A life in which you take what you want and leave the rest in the dust.

And the world, this damned world, had no idea what was coming.

The nights in the Hunsrück were dark, damp, and full of noise. The howling of dogs, the creaking of old beams, the snoring of drunken men lying somewhere in the ditches. For Hannes, it was like a choir whispering to him every night: "You don't belong here. You're not one of them."

He lay in his straw bed, the knife at his chest, his fingers still sticky with dried blood. He looked up at the ceiling, where spiders hung as if they'd long since given up on the world, and he grinned. A boy with barely any teeth in his mouth grinned like someone who wanted to fuck the whole world.

He knew nothing of the future, nothing of fame, nothing of legends. But he knew he wouldn't follow the path the villagers had planned for him: a life full of sweat in the fields, full of obedience, full of genuflecting before priests and noblemen. No. If he had already sensed one thing, it was this: He was born to turn everything upside down.

His eyes burned. Not with fever, not with hunger—but with an uncontrollable rage. It was as if the world had branded him with this mark: bastard. And he accepted it. Not as a disgrace, but as a weapon.

They were already talking in the alleys. "Little Hannes is dangerous." "One day he'll be hanging." "Someone like that will bring us all trouble." They said it with mockery, with fear, with contempt. And he heard every word. And he swore to himself that they would be right. But not in the way they thought. He wouldn't just hang like a thief. He would dance. He would force the whole damned world to know his name before the rope was even tied around his neck.

And as the wind howled through the cracks outside, he whispered into the darkness: "You call me bastard. One day you'll call me king."

It was a childish promise, made in the dirt, without witnesses, without power. But it's precisely in such moments that legends are born. Not from glory. Not from nobility. But from anger, hunger, and the firm will to see the world burn.

And so the story of Schinderhannes began. Not with a heroic song, but with a bastard in the straw, laughing into the darkness.

First blows, first sins

Hannes was no longer a little rascal. At thirteen or fourteen, he grew muscles where there had previously been only hunger and bruises. The hands that had once only grabbed scraps of food were now fists, hard as stones. And he used them. Without hesitation, without fear.

The fights in the village never stopped – but at some point, they escalated. He used to be the punching bag, the bastard everyone hit. Now he was the one who hit back. And how. Once he sent a boy home with a bloody nose; another time, a fat farmer's urchin lay unconscious in the dirt. It was as if Hannes had crossed an invisible line: from victim to perpetrator. From beaten to bully.

The others noticed. They whispered, kept their distance. Some even sought his company—not out of friendship, but out of fear, because he was the kind of guy you'd rather have on your back than in your face. Hannes enjoyed that. For the first time in his life, he felt respect. Even if it was only the respect you'd give a vicious dog.

His mother raged when he came home covered in blood. But her blows meant nothing to him anymore. They bounced off him like rain on stone. He had learned that pain wasn't the end. Pain was the beginning. Every time a fist hit his face, he grew a little stronger. And every time he struck back, he felt more alive than ever before.

It wasn't a fair fight. Hannes fought dirty. He bit, kicked between the legs, grabbed hair, hit with stones. And he loved how the others recoiled in shock when he suddenly smiled, blood running down his forehead. That smile made them nervous. It wasn't a child's smile. It was the grin of a boy who had learned that violence doesn't just hurt—it gives you power.

And so it went on, day after day. In the fields, in the alleys, behind the church. If anyone thought they could push the bastard around, they got a taste of the punch. Hannes didn't fight to be right. He fought to live.

And in these fights, a foundation was laid. The first stones for what he would become. Not a farmhand, not a good son, but a thug, a law unto himself. A bastard who now bit back. And the world was slowly noticing.

There are thefts committed out of hunger—and there are thefts committed out of pure lust. The first, which Hannes committed intentionally, was of the

second kind. He didn't just want to be satisfied; he wanted to feel what it was like to take something, simply because he could.

It was market day, the alley crowded with farmers, traders, carts, and horse manure. The stench of cheese, onions, and sweat hung in the air, as if it could be cut with a knife. Amidst all this, an old baker roared, loudly touting his bread while repeatedly making the same hand movement: push the pusher onto the shelf, out comes the next loaf, wrapped in paper, sold.

Hannes stood there, off to the side, hands in his pockets, knife at the ready as always. But this time it wasn't about fighting. This time it was about speed, about nerves. He watched the baker's movements, the comings and goings of people, the gaps between the moments. And then he did it. A move, quick as lightning, a loaf of bread ripped from the stack, hidden under the rags—and gone.

No one noticed until he'd long since disappeared around the corner. Hannes ran, his chest full of fire, his legs beating faster than his heart could. He wasn't running out of fear. He was running because it felt so damn good. The bread was warm, still fresh from the oven, the smell filled his nose like a promise. He laughed loudly as he ran, laughed at the whole village, at the merchants, at the whole damned order.

He hid behind a barn, broke open the bread, and ate it like a king. Crumbs in his hair, flour on his fingers, but he felt as if he had just outsmarted the world. Victory wasn't in being fed—it was in the act of stealing itself.

And then it happened: He wanted more. Not just bread, not just food. Things that glittered. Things that were forbidden. A ring hanging from a peasant woman's pocket. A copper piece dropped by a drunk. A knife handle more beautiful than his own rusty steel. He began to pay attention to everything that didn't belong to him.

The first urge to steal had seized him. And it was like the first time you drink liquor: you know immediately that you'll do it again. Again and again. And that each time you'll sell a little more of yourself without even realizing it.

That evening, he was still chewing on the last crust of bread while his mother yelled at him for disappearing. But he wasn't listening. He grinned. And there was a sparkle in his eyes. This wasn't hunger anymore. This was the beginning of an addiction.

Hannes was no longer a child, even though the villagers would have liked to keep him in that category. But hormones don't give a damn about village gossip. At fourteen, fifteen, his body burned like a damn oven. Not just a hunger for bread or respect—now came a hunger for skin, for flesh.

The first encounter wasn't out of love. Love wasn't for bastards in the Hunsrück anyway. It was more of a business deal, a quickie in the shadows. The maid from the inn – older, broad in the hips, tired in her eyes. She'd seen it all: drunks, thugs, men who handled her like a piece of cattle. To her, Hannes was just another bastard who would end up in the dirt someday. But one evening, as he was helping her carry wood, she laughed briefly at his cheek, and he took the plunge.

It was awkward, crude, greedy. Not a kiss like those told in fairy tales. Not a tender whisper. It was more like two animals falling over each other in hay. Sweat, straw in their hair, the smell of schnapps coming through the cracks. Hannes didn't know what he was doing, but he knew it was right. His heart pounded, his head was buzzing, and afterward, he laughed—that dirty, impudent laugh that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

The maid pulled her skirts back up, slapped him across the ears, and said, "You'll end up like your father—in nothingness." Then she left. For her, it was a slip-up, a mistake to be forgotten. For Hannes, it was a fire that never went out.

From then on, he was addicted. Not to her, not to tenderness—but to the feeling that had overwhelmed him. He began to watch prostitutes who roamed the tavern when the men were drunk enough to part with a few copper coins. He saw how the men groped them, how they sold themselves, how they laughed, even though it wasn't real laughter. And he swore to himself: He would have that, too. Not later, not someday, but soon.

The other boys might giggle about first kisses, about secret caresses behind the schoolhouse. Not Hannes. For him, sex wasn't a game, not an adventure. For him, it was another sin, another piece of power. Something the church wanted to forbid him, something the elders cursed—and that's precisely why it attracted him.

And every time he closed his eyes, he saw the maid in the straw again, heard her disparaging, "You'll end up like your father"—and he grinned. Because deep down, he knew he wouldn't end up like his father. He would end up like a storm sweeping over everything.

In the Hunsrück, there were two kinds of people: those who toiled until their fingers fell off – and those who made a living from it. Hannes knew early on which kind he didn't want to belong to. He saw the priests in their clean robes, the noblemen with their fat bellies, the overseers with their whips. And he sensed that all of this – church, nobility, order – was nothing but a single, massive fraud.

It started small. A priest slapped him in the market for allegedly stealing an apple. Hannes spat at his feet. The whole village held its breath. The priest raised his hand to slap him again, but Hannes just stared. Those black eyes, feared even as a child, now bored into the man, and for a brief moment the saint hesitated. Then he let it go.

That was the moment Hannes realized: authority thrives on fear. And those who show no fear already have half the power.

He immediately tested it further. A field overseer threatened him with a whip because he was working too slowly – Hannes grabbed the whip, pulled it away, and laughed in his face. He received blows for it, bled, and lay in the straw for two days with swollen ribs. But he had gained something more important: the feeling that they couldn't break him.

In the inn, he heard the peasants complaining about how heavy the taxes were, how cruel the lords were. They all cursed in their drunken stupor – but the next morning they buckled again, paid, slaving, toiling. Hannes hated them for this almost as much as the Junkers themselves. "They're all cowards," he thought. "They all have the noose around their necks and are pulling it themselves."

It was clear to him: he would never kneel. Not before priests, not before noblemen, not before God. If someone wanted to bend him, he would rather die. And deep inside, deep down, this thought grew: Maybe he wasn't just a bastard. Maybe he was the one who could one day bring the whole damned game crashing down.

And while others dutifully murmured the Lord's Prayer during mass, Hannes sat outside on the wall, carving with his knife and grinning. He knew: the true religion here was violence. And he was already its most loyal altar boy.

A bastard on his own is a problem. But a bastard with companions? That's dynamite in the straw.

Hannes had fought, stolen, and rebelled all along—mostly alone. But eventually, the other rat children, who had just as little to lose as he did, found their way. No inheritance, no family, no future. Only hunger, fists, and rage.

There was Klos, the son of a drunkard who, by the age of twelve, had already drunk more liquor than water. There was Peter, a quiet dog with eyes like a beaten wolf, who never spoke but struck like a hammer. And there was Anna—yes, a girl—the daughter of a prostitute who had learned to lie faster than she could breathe. She was sharp, cheeky, and no one knew whether she admired Hannes or was just waiting for the chance to rob him.

They met behind the mill, in the ditches, in the woods. At first, it was just a few loitering sessions, roaming around, stealing a few apples. But soon it became more. They swore to each other—not with blood, not with crosses, but with a large jug of stolen liquor—that they would stick together. Against the village, against the authorities, against everyone.

"If one of them falls, we'll get him out," said Hannes. "If one of them betrays us, he gets the knife." They nodded, all three of them, as serious as executioners. It was a children's bond, sure, but in this world, it meant more than any marriage, more than any mass.

They called themselves no gang, no noble title, no grand symbol. They were simply the Dirty Ones. Four lost souls who cursed the rest of the world. And in the dirt, the smoke, the stench, they swore that they would take what they needed—no matter how.

From then on, they were no longer alone. When Hannes hit someone, Klos and Peter stood beside him. When Anna stole, Hannes was the one who distracted the guards. If one of them got a beating, the others carried him home.

And in the village, they were already whispering: "There he is again, the bastard, and he's bringing his dogs with him." And every whisper was like music to Hannes' ears. He wanted them to be afraid. And he wanted them to know: The bastard is no longer alone.

It was only a matter of time. If you steal long enough, raise your fist long enough, spit in people's faces long enough, eventually they'll catch you.

It was a damp evening, the village half drunk from the market. Hannes and his gang had already spent half the day raking in small loot: a few copper coins

here, a piece of cheese there, a mug of beer that Klos slipped under his arm. They had become greedy, too bold, too loud.

And then they reached too high. Anna had seen the guard's wallet hanging loosely from his belt. A fat, heavy thing that clinked with every step. Hannes could almost hear the coins singing. He gave her the signal. She distracted him, Klos pretended to vomit, and Hannes grabbed it.

This time, however, the guard turned around faster than he expected. A hand like a vice grabbed Hannes's arm. "Got you, bastard," the man growled. Hannes tried to pull out the knife, but three other guys were there immediately, knocked him down, and threw him into the dirt. Klos ran, Peter disappeared, Anna screamed. And Hannes? He was lying in the mud, his face covered in blood, the bag still in his hand.

They dragged him before the village elders. A dark room, candles, cold faces. "That bastard again," one muttered. They didn't talk for long. It was clear to them: someone like him needed a lesson.

The punishment was a beating. Publicly. In the marketplace. The people gathered as if at a festival. Children laughed, women hissed, men grinned. The bastard was in the pillory, finally on display. They tied him down, the cane whipped across his back, again and again. The wood splintered, the skin burst, blood flowed.

But Hannes didn't scream. He gritted his teeth, even grinned. Every time the stick came down, he raised his head, spat out blood and snot, and laughed in the people's faces. "Is that all?" he growled once, and the crowd murmured.

After twenty blows, he was barely conscious. But he had achieved something: They hadn't broken him. On the contrary—they had made him stronger. Because the fear they wanted to instill in him hadn't come. Only more hatred, more defiance.

When they finally untied him, he collapsed. Anna pulled him away, Klos and Peter kept watch. But as he lay in the dirt, his skin raw, his muscles burning, he still grinned. "Let them hit me," he whispered. "I always get back up."

And he did.

The Hunsrück was narrow. Too narrow. For the farmers, for the children, for the lazy pigs wallowing in the mud. But it was narrowest of all for Hannes. After the beating, he had become even more of a ghost throughout the village: the

bastard who doesn't scream, who laughs while the blood flows. People viewed him with a mixture of fear and disgust.

And Hannes? He absorbed it. This whispering, this muttering behind his back, this secret wonder. It made him bigger. He knew he couldn't stay here. If he stayed stuck in this hole, they would hang him eventually. Not because he was guilty—but because they wanted to. Because they wanted peace.

He began to look more into the distance. At the roads that led through the forests. At the wagons that passed through. Merchants, strangers, soldiers. He could practically smell that the world was bigger than this dump. Out there were cities, dives, gold, women, adventures—and he wanted it all.

The gang sensed it too. Klos constantly talked about the Rhine, about Mainz, where the bars no longer smell of goats, but of real rum. Anna swore she'd heard of prostitutes in Frankfurt wearing silk. Peter said nothing, but the same hunger glowed in his eyes.

At night, Hannes lay awake, his wounds from the beating still fresh, his knife beside him in the straw. He heard the wind through the cracks, and he knew: Soon he would be gone. Not tomorrow, not next week—but soon. This village was too small for him. The world would get to know him, whether it wanted to or not.

Sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he could see himself marching through the streets. With a dozen men behind him, with weapons, with courage, with blood on his hands. No longer a bastard, no longer a whipping boy—but someone whose name was whispered everywhere.

And he swore to himself, quietly, barely audibly, as the wind swept across the roof: "When I go, I won't go as a nobody. I'll go as the one they'll fear."

Thus ended his childhood. Not with a prayer, not with a blessing. But with a bastard who saw the Hunsrück only as a stepping stone. A shadow that wanted to grow bigger. Much bigger.

Cold, hunger and a stolen coat

The Hunsrück in winter was no fairytale of white snow and the sound of bells. It was a kick in the ass from nature. Icy winds whipped across the hills, snow lay like a heavy, hostile blanket over everything, and the cold crept into every hole, every crevice, every goddamn bone. It was hard for the farmers. For Hannes and his gang, it was hell.

Hunger came first. Always. It ate into your stomach like a rat, gnawing, biting, keeping you awake. The days were short, the nights endless, and stomachs growled louder than dogs. Hannes woke up in the morning, his breath frozen in the air, his ribs like drumsticks beneath his skin. He felt his body grow thinner, lighter—and at the same time harder, like a piece of old wood that can no longer splinter, but only burns.

They searched for anything edible. Turnips half-rotted in the snow. Scraps someone had thrown away. Once, Peter found a dead bird, half-eaten, and they cooked it in a rusty can. The meat was tough, bitter, full of feathers—but they gobbled it down like a feast.

Hunger drove her mad. Klos spoke only of roasts, of lard, of beer he'd never drunk. Anna became quieter, her eyes deep and black, like an animal just waiting to be eaten. And Hannes? He laughed sometimes, a cold, insane laugh, his teeth chattering. "If hunger devours us," he growled, "then I'll bite back."

The cold was worse than the beatings, worse than the pillory. It wasn't loud, not angry—it was quiet, indifferent. It settled over everything, suffocating, making their fingers go numb, their blood stagnant. They slept huddled together in the hay, back to back, to avoid freezing, and yet every morning they woke up with the feeling that the night had almost taken them.

Hunger turned them into animals. Once, they stole a bone from a dog's mouth. Another time, Hannes rummaged through the latrine and found some beans that had run through the latrine undigested. He chewed them, choked, vomited—and chewed some more. That was winter. No pride, no dignity. Only the bare question: Will you survive or not?

And while the snow fell outside and the village became as silent as a cemetery, Hannes lay awake, his lips chapped, his stomach empty, and whispered: "The devil himself would sooner eat me than I die of this hunger."

Hunger alone was a slaughter, but the cold was its accomplice. Together they destroyed you, slowly, gruelingly, without you being able to defend yourself. Hannes and his gang learned quickly: survival meant finding a new trick every damn day to wrest a little piece of life from the cold and hunger.

They stole as much wood as they could. Logs from farmers' stacks, branches from the forest, even boards from fences. Anything that burned was fire. They dragged it to the ruins of an old barn that served as their shelter and lit a small, smelly fire there. The smoke filled their lungs, their eyes watered, but the embers kept their fingers alive.

The food was worse. They fought over every crust, every scrap. A piece of bread that Anna had picked up somewhere was rationed, torn into tiny shreds. Everyone bit into it, chewing slowly, as if that would prolong the taste. But as soon as the last piece was swallowed, the hunger returned, stronger, louder, like a dog that can never get enough.

Once they caught a rat. They had made a trap, an old piece of wire, and a bit of bacon for bait. When the animal bit, they cheered as if they had found a treasure. They roughly skinned it, threw it into the fire, and ate it blackened. The meat tasted of ash and disease, but it filled their stomachs for a few hours.

But the fight for survival also made them hard against each other. Klos once stole half of Anna's share. She noticed, grabbed him by the hair, and screamed like a fury. Peter had to separate them, otherwise she would have stabbed him in the stomach. Hannes watched, grinned coldly, and said, "That's good. It's better that we tear each other's skin open than give it away willingly."

The cold continued to gnaw at them. Fingers swelled, lips burst, coughs racked them at night until the hay was wet with sweat. But they didn't give up. They huddled closer together, warmed themselves, and shared the crumbs, however pitiful they were. Everyone knew: whoever was left alone was dead.

And Hannes, amidst all the misery, sometimes laughed. A dirty, defiant laugh that frightened the others. "Can't you see?" he gasped, the smoke stinging his eyes. "If we survive this, if we get through this winter, nothing will stop us."

The words were boastful, almost insane. But in the barn, amidst the hunger, cold, and rat meat, they sounded like a vow.

Winter wasn't an enemy you could defeat. It was an executioner. One that took its time, slowly draining you, leaving you shivering and weak, until at some point you simply couldn't get up. And that's exactly what happened.

He was an old farmhand, one of those peasants who had toiled all their lives without ever seeing anything but manure, sweat, and the cold snout of poverty. Hannes knew him only by sight—a man with a hunched back, always coughing, always bent over, as if he had surrendered to the ground years ago.

One morning they found him. He was lying on the edge of the village, half-buried in the snow, his eyes open, his beard covered in ice. The dogs had already sniffed at him. No one knew how long he had lain there. But the cold had made him still. No screams, no struggle. Simply frozen, like a piece of wood someone had thrown away.

The villagers talked of God's will, of sin, of punishment. But Hannes saw only the naked truth: Winter kills faster and harder than any knife. It wasn't a heroic death, not a sacrifice. It was simply the death of a man no one would miss. One less shadow in a village full of shadows.

He stood there, staring at the dead body, and something clicked in his head. "I don't want to end up like this," he thought. Not silent in the snow, forgotten as if he had never existed. Better with blood in his mouth, fire in his eyes, a rope around his neck—but never like this.

The gang was silent. Even Klos, who was usually cocky, kept quiet. Anna just shrugged her shoulders, as if she could push the image away. Peter stared at the ground, his hands clenched into fists. They all knew that winter could get them just as easily if they weren't stronger than him.

That evening, back in the barn, they lit the fire, smaller than usual, weaker. The image of the dead farmhand haunted them. Hannes chewed on a piece of hard bread they'd found somewhere and finally spat. "Screw God," he growled. "Screw everyone. If one of us dies, it won't be like this. It won't be fighting."

And in that moment, they all realized: It wasn't a stupid saying. It was an order. A law. And outside, winter howled like a wolf that hadn't yet had its fill of prey.

After the dead farmhand, the hunger didn't diminish, the cold didn't warm up. They continued to eat rats, steal wood, and cough blood into the night. But Hannes wasn't the type to just die quietly in the straw. He began to search with his black eyes—not for pity, but for opportunities.

And then he saw it: the coat.

It was a thick, heavy winter coat, worn by a merchant who wandered through the village. Black, made of coarse fabric, with a fur collar, warm as a two-legged stove. The merchant trudged through the snow, his boots buried up to his ankles, his face red with cold—but he wasn't cold. And every time Hannes saw him, he felt a burning sensation inside.

This coat wasn't just a piece of clothing. It was a symbol. Warmth, protection, survival. And at the same time, a middle finger in the face of those shivering in rags. Hannes couldn't shake the thought: "It's mine."

He told the others. Klos laughed nervously and coughed. "You'll never steal that. They'll kill you for that." Anna glared at him, skeptical and curious at the same time. "And if you do it?" Peter remained silent, as always, but his eyes said he was ready.

Hannes grinned. That cold, dangerous grin he always had when he'd decided something. "Screw it," he said. "If we get the coat, we'll survive. If not, we'll freeze to death anyway. What's worse?"

The gang remained silent. They knew he was right.

From that day on, Hannes followed the merchant with his eyes. He noted his movements, when he slept, where he camped. He watched him take off his coat when he got drunk in the tavern. Hannes gritted his teeth, the cold crept down his neck, and he swore to himself: "I'll get that coat, even if I have to shed blood for it."

It wasn't a stupid dream, not a wish. It was a plan. And outside, winter laughed quietly in the snow, because it knew: blood would soon spurt in the white.

The day came sooner than they expected. The merchant in the black coat had gotten drunk in the tavern, slurring his words and boasting that he would soon be moving to Mainz, where at least there was decent beer. He was sweating, his face as red as a beet, and at some point he staggered out to sleep in his cart.

Hannes gave the signal. A quick glance, a nod – the gang knew what was going on.

They crept behind, through the crunching snow, each breath a cloud that betrayed their survival. The merchant slurred his words, slumped heavily onto the cart, pulled his coat tighter around himself, and fell into a semi-coma.

"Now," whispered Hannes.

Peter jumped first, yanking the man down by his arms, Klos grabbed his head, and Anna pulled at his legs. The merchant woke up, screaming, lashing out wildly. But Hannes was already there. The knife flashed, unaimed, unplanned—just a quick, furious cut across his cheek. The man screamed, blood spurting into the snow.

"Shut up!" Hannes growled, and this insane fire burned in his eyes. The merchant wheezed, tried to defend himself, but there were four of them. They pulled, they hit, they tore. Finally, he lay on the ground, blood dripping into the white snow like red ink on paper.

Hannes ripped his coat off his body. Warm. Heavy. Fur collar gleaming in the darkness. For a moment, he held it up as if it were a crown. Then he threw it over his shoulders. The fabric closed around his thin body, the cold receded a little, and he grinned.

"Now I no longer belong to the filth," he spat into the darkness. "Now the filth belongs to me."

The merchant was still groaning, trying to stand up. Anna kicked him in the face, coldly, without a word. The man slumped, unconscious or dead—no one looked. They had what they wanted.

They ran back to the barn, through knee-deep snow, blood on the knife, laughter in his throat. Hannes pulled his coat tighter around himself as if he'd been born for it. And deep down, he knew: This hadn't been a simple theft. This was a step. A step out of hunger, out of helplessness. A step into another world.

And as the snow continued to fall outside, each of them knew: There was no turning back now.

The cloak was more than just a piece of cloth. It was a victory. A triumph. A stolen throne that Hannes carried on his bony shoulders. When he returned to the barn with it, the others looked at him as if he had suddenly become a king.

He spread his arms, turning in the light of the meager fire, his fur collar gleaming, the heavy fabric hanging down to his boots. He was still the same bastard, the same starving man with the black eyes—but the coat made him taller. More powerful. Untouchable.

"Look at this," he grinned. "The squires wear their velvet cloaks, the priests their chasubles. And me? I wear the cloak I took for myself. Not given. Not bought. Taken."

Klos clapped and laughed, a hysterical, hungry laugh. Peter just nodded, wordless as always, but there was respect in his eyes. And Anna? She looked at him longer than the others, her pupils dark as night. A look that said: *You're not to be trifled with.*

Hannes felt the warmth of the coat, the cold slowly leaving his skin. For the first time in weeks, his bones were no longer shaking. And this feeling burned deeper than the fire. It wasn't just warmth—it was power. The coat was the symbol that he was taking what he needed. That he was no longer a victim, but a hunter.

That night he slept differently. Not curled up like a half-starved animal, but stretched out, his cloak over him, his knife beside him. And he didn't dream of hunger. He dreamed of wagons full of gold, of houses full of wine, of cities that knew his name.

The coat was just a beginning. But it felt like a taste. And Hannes swore to himself, as the winter wind rattled the boards outside: "If I can wear this, then one day I'll wear much more. Crowns, gold, glory. Everything. And if someone stands in the way—then they'll lie in the snow."

It was just a coat. But for Hannes, it was his first suit of armor.

The coat saved his life. It was that simple. Without the heavy, warm thing, Hannes would have remained lying in the snow like the old farmhand, frozen, forgotten, staring open-eyed at the sky. But with the coat over his shoulders, he felt as if he had defeated winter itself.

The cold was still there. The hunger still gnawed. But every time he dug his fingers into the fabric, he felt something new inside. Pride, perhaps. Or madness. Or both. He was no longer a bastard who had to live off the leftovers of others. He was the one who took. And the others saw it, too. The children who used to mock him now kept their distance. Even the farmers looked away

when he passed. Not just because they were afraid of the knife—but because they recognized in the coat that he was something they would never be: free.

But freedom was expensive. Deep down, Hannes knew that. The coat had been worth blood. And blood always demanded more blood. He couldn't go back to his old life, in rags, in the dirt. The coat clung to him like a vow. A promise that he would no longer be small.

No one in the barn said it out loud, but they all knew: This was just the beginning. Today it was a coat. Tomorrow it would be a horse. Then maybe a carriage. A house. And eventually, entire villages trembling before him.

Hannes pulled up his collar, felt the warmth on his neck, and grinned into the darkness. "The village is too small," he murmured. "The world is ours."

And outside, in the snow, the wind seemed to laugh. As if it had long known that the bastard in the coat would soon fetch more than anyone in the Hunsrück could have imagined.

The village pubs and their poisonous breath

The dives stank of smoke, sweat, and cheap liquor. For Hannes, it wasn't a stench—it was the breath of the world, the filth from which he was born. But this time it was different. He was no longer the boy who secretly crawled under tables and stole leftovers. He was big enough to sit at the table. And that evening, for the first time, a cup that belonged to him stood before him.

It was beer, stale and warm, full of foam and spit from the barman, who hadn't rinsed the mug. But it was his. He raised it with all the poise of a king ascending to the throne and took the first sip. The stuff didn't burn like schnapps, but it filled his stomach and weighed heavily on his head. He smacked his lips, grinned, wiped the foam from his mouth, and growled, "Shit, that tastes good."

The men laughed. A few rough guys, who had already lost half their teeth, toasted him. "Well, so the bastard can drink like a man." They said it mockingly, but there was a spark of recognition in their eyes. He had crossed the threshold. No longer a child. No longer a silent eavesdropper in the shadows. One of them.

Klos tipped over next to him, already half drunk, even though he'd barely gotten any. Peter sat still, his hands around his mug, drinking slowly, as if he wanted to savor the fire in small sips. Anna, who still looked too young for this place but was already tougher than half the men, took the mug from Hannes, drank deeply, belched, and laughed. "Tastes like piss," she said. "But better than snow."

The innkeeper growled that they shouldn't stay long, that he didn't want to get into trouble with the authorities if the children caused trouble again. But he let them drink. Not out of kindness, but because they were paying—with coins that weren't theirs, of course.

And so Hannes sat there, the bastard in the coat, his first beer in his own mug, and felt the world changing. No hunger, no cold, no mockery – just smoke, voices, and the golden poison flowing through his veins. He was no longer a spectator. He was a player.

And deep in his skull it was already hammering: *I want more of that. Much more.*

In the pubs, every word weighed more than the beer. Men, half-drunk, with red noses, yellow teeth, and eyes already half-swimming with their intoxication, told stories bigger than their bodies. Heroic deeds, battles, women they supposedly had – every sentence stank of lies, but they let it out like a fart they were proud of.

Hannes sat there, cup in hand, and listened. He heard one man boast that he had killed ten Frenchmen with his bare hands. Another swore he had had a whore in Frankfurt more beautiful than a queen. A third said he had strangled a wolf in the forest with only his belt.

All lies. Hannes knew that. He'd seen the men, how they slaved away by day, how they lay vomiting in the trenches at night. No heroes, no wolf killers, no queen fuckers. Just peasants, drunks, poor bastards who told themselves stories to make life seem less miserable.

But he didn't laugh. He listened. Every lie still had a spark of truth. From the fairy tales, he learned how they thought, what they wanted, what they were afraid of. He learned that every man had a weakness, that everyone made themselves bigger than they were—and that this could be exploited.

Sometimes, when the stories got too colorful, Hannes put down his cup, leaned forward, and asked quietly, "So? Where was that really?" Then they stammered, laughed, and evaded. He grinned because he knew he'd caught them.

The drunkards weren't heroes to him. They were teachers. Not in courage, not in strength, but in lies. They showed him that words could be weapons just as much as knives. And Hannes absorbed the poison like he absorbed the smoke and the beer.

Later, when he was standing outside in the cold again, he grinned into the darkness: "They're all liars. But someday they'll tell you about me. And then it won't be a lie."

The smoke hung low, the mugs had grown emptier, and then the cards were placed on the table. Greasy, worn things that had seen more lies than a priest in confession. Also dice, heavy, angular, full of notches, handled so often by the men that they seemed almost alive.

For the first time, Hannes saw how money truly disappeared. Not through taxes, not through levies—but through the hands that rolled dice and threw cards. Copper coins clinked across the table, sometimes stacked up, sometimes disappearing into the pocket of a grinning pig. All in seconds.

He sat down, still half a boy, but with eyes that devoured everything. At first, just a spectator, then a cup slid over: "Come on, bastard, show me if you're lucky." He grinned and took the cards.

He lost the first few games. Sure. The others laughed and stole the copper coins he'd stolen from somewhere. But he learned quickly. He watched the fingers, the twitches in his face, the shaking hands when a man bluffed. Hannes realized: The game wasn't about luck. It was about weakness. And he could smell weakness like a dog smells blood.

After just an hour, he won back a small piece of bread. Later, a few coins. The men cursed, laughed, and toasted him. "That bastard has the devil in his dice cup," one grumbled. Hannes just grinned and let the coins roll through his fingers.

But he also felt the other side: the ache in his stomach when he lost, the anger, the burning that wanted more. Cards and dice weren't a game. They were a

drug, just like beer. A drug that made you forget everything: hunger, cold, pain—as long as you believed the next roll would save you.

And that night, Hannes realized he had two options: either he controlled the game, or the game controlled him.

Of course, he swore to himself that he would be the one to master it. But somewhere in the darkness, in the clinking of dice, the devil laughed softly and murmured: *We'll see.*

The bars weren't just about dice, beer, and lies. There were also women whose last names you didn't know. Women who slunk between the tables like cats, with skirts that had more holes than fabric, with faces that had already been held by a hundred hands. Some laughed, some were silent, all had eyes that said, "I've seen it all, and none of it was pretty."

For Hannes, it was like a second school. He saw the men grabbing her, laughing as coins fell from their pockets. He saw them disappearing into the back, into dark rooms, and emerging again, sweating, gasping, their eyes empty.

He knew this wasn't a fairy tale, no romance. There was no love here, only trade. Bodies for coins, warmth for beer. And yet he was drawn to it. Not because he was in love. But because he sensed that there lay another element of power here.

The first whore who looked at him was old. Maybe thirty, maybe forty—hard to say in a world where women already looked like grandmothers at twenty. She grinned at him, crooked, a tooth missing. "Well, bastard," she whispered, "do you have any coins in your pocket yet?" He didn't. But he grinned back. "Soon," he said.

And at that very moment, he understood that it was never just about fucking. It was about buying, about taking, about possessing. Not love, not closeness—it was power.

Anna saw all this, sometimes standing beside him, observing the women with a cold gaze. She despised them, almost spat if one came too close. But Hannes sensed that she, too, knew: These women were mirrors. Mirrors of what they could all become if they weren't stronger than life.

The smoke, the voices, the whores' giggling—all of it settled in his head. He swore he would have them all. Not today, not tomorrow. But someday. The women, the money, the whole bar.

Because it was clear in his mind: He wouldn't be one of the men who dragged himself out of the chambers drunk and empty. He would be the one who owned the chambers.

It was bound to happen. Bars are powder kegs, and Hannes had long been the match.

The evening was loud and crowded, the smoke hung thickly, the men roared, the dice clinked. Hannes sat at a table with Klos and Peter, Anna crouched half-in the shadows, watching. A farmer, fat and drunk, staggered by, saw the bastard, saw the coat, and he didn't like it. "Well, bastard," he slurred, "you pulled that fur off your mother's back, didn't you?" The whole inn laughed.

Hannes grinned. Not in a friendly way. That grin was more of a threat than a smile. "Better than your wife," he growled, "she's just carrying lice."

A blow. Fast, clumsy, stinking of liquor. The farmer swung, hitting Hannes in the ear. The crowd roared. But Hannes staggered only briefly, straightened up—and struck back.

He didn't strike like a farmer, not like a man hardened by the fields. He struck like someone who had practiced it his whole life. His fist slammed into the farmer's nose, breaking cartilage, spurting blood. The man roared, stumbled back, knocking mugs off the table.

Chaos. Chairs tipped over, beer sloshed, men screamed. Peter threw the first mug, Klos kicked someone in the ribs, Anna laughed shrilly like a crow. And Hannes? Hannes was in the middle of it, his fists like hammers, his knife at the ready.

The farmer fell to the ground, his face bloody. Another jumped up and tried to grab Hannes, but got his elbow in his teeth. A third pulled at his coat, but Hannes turned. The knife flashed, only cutting his collar, but the message was clear: One more step and you die.

The inn was in uproar. The landlord was yelling, the whores were screaming, a dog was barking somewhere. But Hannes stood there, chest heaved, his face covered in blood and sweat, laughing. A wild, insane laugh that was louder than anything else in the room.

And at that moment, he was no longer a bastard. He was the devil himself, who had taken over the pub.

When they finally threw him out, bloody, laughing, knife still in hand, everyone knew: From now on, you'd better expect that bastard when you enter the dive.

After the fight, Hannes was a made man in the dive bar. Not loved—no one loved a bastard—but respected, feared, tolerated. And that was enough. The landlord growled, the whores giggled, the men cursed—but whenever he raised his cup, someone always filled it.

The alcohol flowed. First beer, then brandy, thin and acrid, but strong enough to burn away hunger, cold, and blows. Hannes drank like a fish. Every sip was like fire, warming him and simultaneously enveloping his head in cotton wool. He felt the pain drain from his ribs, the scratches on his face dulling.

It was more than drinking. It was a ritual. The first sip killed his hunger. The second made him laugh. The third made him invincible. And the fourth, fifth, sixth—they transformed the entire world into a single roar. Voices became muffled, faces blurred, the laughter grew deeper, dirtier.

At some point, Klos puked in the corner, Peter remained silent and drank with a straight face, Anna stole a drunk's bag while he slurred and grabbed her ass. And Hannes? Hannes sat there, cup in hand, knife at his belt, feeling like the world belonged to him.

The high was a devil and a friend. It robbed you of your clarity, but it gave you courage. Courage to keep going, courage to take the next hit, courage to commit the next sin. Hannes knew he was becoming addicted. But he didn't give a damn. "Screw tomorrow," he slurred, "I'm alive today."

And that was the secret of the high: For a few hours, there were no bastard stories, no cold nights, no empty stomachs. Only warmth in the belly and fire in the head.

As he later stumbled unsteadily out into the night, his coat around his shoulders, his breath steaming in the cold air, he grinned. He was high on beer, blood, and chaos. And he knew he would never let go of this high.

The dive was more than a place. It was a school, a stage, a battlefield. Here, Hannes had drunk his first beer, exposed his first lies, thrown his first dice, seen his first whores, and gotten into his first fight. And he had tasted intoxication—that golden poison that was stronger than hunger and harder than cold.

But with every night in the pub, a thought grew in him: This was just the beginning. He saw the men drinking themselves to death, screaming, puking,

falling asleep. He saw them dragging themselves across the fields the next morning as if they'd never existed. For them, the pub was a refuge. For him, it was a springboard.

"One day," he muttered, staggering into the snow after a long night, "this will all be mine. Not just a cup. Not just a chair. The whole damn dive. And not just one. All of them."

The gang laughed about it. Klos held his stomach, Anna snorted, Peter just shook his head. But there was a burning glee in Hannes's eyes. He meant it. He sensed that he was bigger than this village, bigger than this pub, bigger than the Hunsrück itself.

The bars gave him his first sense of power. And they gave him his first promise: that he would take much more. Much more.

And so this chapter of his life ended not with an oath to God, not with a vow, but with a bastard in a coat, completely drunk, vomiting into the snow and laughing.

A laugh that already sounded like the future.

Old women, new scars

If the men in the village were drunkards and thugs, then the women were poisoners with words. Old crows, with scarves over their heads, crooked backs, and voices sharper than any knife. They had spent their lives bearing children, losing children, burying men, or caring for them, without anything ever getting better. Bitterness was their milk, and they gave it to anyone who came too close.

For Hannes, they were worse than the men's beatings. Because the fists left bruises that healed. But the words of the old men? They ate into his skull like rats into bread. "Son of a bitch," they hissed as he passed. "Devil's spawn." "The bastard will end up on the gallows."

Some even threw whatever they had in hand at him: a bowl of sewage, potato peelings, a piece of stale bread that even the dogs didn't want anymore. And they laughed when he stood in the dirt, his coat dirty, his hair matted.

But Hannes remained standing. He didn't turn away, he didn't duck. He stared back. With those black and hard eyes that spoke more than any words. The women hastily crucified themselves, murmuring prayers, because they saw something in his pupils that frightened them: not shame, not humility, but defiance.

He even grinned sometimes. A cold, young, but already evil grin. "Save the curses," he once growled, "I make my own destiny." Then they squawked like startled chickens, threw their aprons over their heads, and cried out to God as if the bastard himself had spoken to the devil.

Men might hate him because he was a bastard. But women? They hated him because he didn't crumble under their venom. Because he looked back, laughed back, spat back.

And deep down, Hannes knew: These women were prophets. Not because they were right with their gallows curses, but because one day he would be so great that even their mockery would rest like a crown on his head.

The women took particular delight in publicly dismantling Hannes. They needed no pretext, no reason—his mere existence was enough. As he walked through the alley, his coat wrapped tightly around his shoulders, they called after him:

"Well, the little king of the filthy farm! Look at him, he's already wearing the gallows like a collar." "Be careful the rope doesn't look better on you than the fur!" "When the bastard laughs, an angel dies—and there are hardly any flying around here anymore."

The village listened. The men laughed, the children giggled, the dogs barked. It was like a theater, and Hannes was the main character, whether he wanted to be or not.

Once, a particularly old witch was sitting on the bench in front of her house. Wrinkled, her face like dried leather, her eyes milky, but her tongue as sharp as ever. Hannes ran by, and she called out, "Stop, bastard, I want to see your face so I can recognize it when they hang it one day!" The whole village roared with laughter.

Hannes stopped. He walked slowly toward the old woman, so close that she could smell his breath—beer, blood, and hunger. He bent down, stared at her, those milky eyes, and whispered: "If I hang, old woman, you'll come with me. I'll take you with me on my rope."

She screamed, flailed with her bony hands, and cried out for God. The people fell silent, their laughter dying in their throats. For a moment, there was only this image: the bastard threatening an old woman, and the old woman crossing herself as if the devil himself had spoken.

Ridicule and scorn were poison. But Hannes had learned to drink it like schnapps: it burned, it made him sick, but it also gave him strength. Every insult wasn't a stab in the back for him—it was proof that he stood out. That they couldn't ignore him.

And so he continued through the alleys, head held high, while the women screamed, cursed, and condemned him. He just grinned. For he knew: each of their curses was a crown they were secretly placing on his head.

Hannes had already collected scratches, bruises, split lips, and broken ankles. But these were wounds that healed. A few days, and the pain was gone, the skin smooth again. But eventually, the day came when he received a scar that remained. A mark that he carried with him forever from then on—like a seal the world had burned into his skin.

It was late, deep into the night, and the dive was already half empty. Hannes had drunk too much, laughed too loudly, and won too much at dice. A farmer, as big as an ox, sweaty and smelly, had lost his last coin. He stood up, his veins bulging in his throat, and screamed: "The bastard cheated!"

Before Hannes could respond, the first blow flew. The guy was fast, furious, and a knife flashed in his hand. Not long, not a sword—but sharp enough. Hannes stepped back, reaching for the steel on his belt himself. The crowd erupted, chairs crashed, someone shouted for the innkeeper.

Then came the cut. Not deep in the chest, not fatal. But across his left cheek, from his ear almost to his chin. Warm blood spurted out, ran down his neck, dripped into his collar. Hannes felt the pain, that burning fire that almost struck him down. But he grinned. He grinned as the blood ran into his mouth, and spat it in the ox's face.

Then he struck. First with his fist, then with a knife. The farmer fell, screaming, and the men pulled him away. Hannes stood there, covered in blood, his face open, but his eyes full of triumph.

The wound became infected. It healed slowly, burned for days, and every night it dripped onto the straw. But it healed. And the scar remained. A red, crooked line that marked his face forever.

The women saw her and whispered: "That is the mark of the devil." The men saw her and remained silent for longer when he came into the bar.

Hannes himself? He saw the line across his face in an old, cracked mirror – and grinned. "Now everyone recognizes me," he murmured. "Now everyone sees that I'm someone you can't miss."

It wasn't just a scar. It was his first crown.

The scar healed, but it didn't make Hannes less invisible—it made him more visible. Everyone saw it immediately, that red, crooked line running across his cheek. And the old people in the village, the women with their toothless mouths and harsh voices, pounced on it like crows on carrion.

"Look at this!" one shrieked as he walked through the alley. "That's the sign! The devil has marked his child so we can find him on the gallows!"

"Yes," howled another, "the bastard already bears his death mark. Soon he'll be dancing with the rope around his neck, and the ravens will peck out his eyes!"

The children laughed, the men grinned crookedly, but there was something else in the faces of the old people: fear. Fear they hid behind their screams. They saw in this scar not just shame—they saw a prophecy.

Hannes stopped again. He turned to them, slowly, his face half in shadow, the scar red and fresh like an open wound. "You're right," he said calmly. "I'm going to the gallows. But first, you'll all take something from me. Your sons. Your husbands. Your houses. And when I hang, I'll dance in your faces."

The women screamed, threw crosses on their foreheads, and cried out to God. Some grabbed their grandchildren and pulled them into the house as if Hannes were already the plague on two legs. But he kept going, his coat heavy, his eyes black, grinning.

For the curses of the elders weren't a punishment for him. They were fuel. Every curse, every scream, every "Gallows Child!" was like a blow that didn't strike him down, but rather lifted him up.

And deep down, deep down, he knew: They would be right. But not in the way they thought. Not quietly, not quickly, not in the shadows. If he fell, it would be loud, it would be with fire, and it would be in such a way that their entire village would never sleep again without hearing his laughter.

The elders saw it as the gallows. Hannes saw it as his stage.

Hate was the only luxury Hannes could afford. No gold, no inheritance, no future—but hate, he had it in abundance. And he absorbed it like other people absorb warm wine.

The old men spat their curses, the children threw stones, the men growled into their mugs. All hatred. And Hannes grinned. Because he realized: The hatred made him stronger. Every look that despised him was like a punch that made him harder. Every insult was a stone from which he built his own fortress.

He was no longer a boy who cried when they called him "bastard." He was a bastard who laughed when they shouted it. He walked through the village with the scar on his face and the cloak around his shoulders, and the more they spat, the straighter he held his head.

"You hate me? Good," he often muttered into the night as he lay in the straw. "Then I'll give you reason enough to hate me. I want to be your hate. I want you to be unable to sleep at night because you have my name in your head."

It wasn't just defiance. It was a motor. Hatred drove him on when hunger nearly knocked him over. Hatred made him clench his fists when the cold stiffened his bones. Hatred was like liquor—bitter, burning, but it kept you going.

His gang saw it. Klos was a coward, often too drunk to understand. Peter remained silent, but he sensed Hannes becoming tougher. Anna understood it best. "They hate you because they're afraid," she once whispered. Hannes grinned back: "And that's exactly why I'm alive."

Hatred became his shield, his weapon, his fuel. And while the ancients hoped to crush him with their curses, they did only one thing: They built him up.

A bastard, fed on nothing but bread crusts, cheap beer – and the hatred of an entire world.

Hannes quickly realized: Hate alone will get you far, but not far enough. When you're up against an entire village, you need more than fists, more than knives.

You need people. Not friends—friends are for weaklings. You need dogs that bite when you command them. Rats that follow you when you show the way into the darkness.

Klos had long been at his side, a fool, but loyal as a dog. Peter was silent, but when he hit, he hit hard. Anna was venomous and cunning, capable of doing more damage with her tongue than with a dagger. But that wasn't enough.

So Hannes began gathering the other outcasts. Those who also had no future. The beggar's son, who at twelve could already steal better than recite the Lord's Prayer. A shepherd boy who preferred slaughtering sheep to tending them. Even a cripple, limping, but with one arm so strong he could split boards.

They came to him because he was the one they hated the most. Because he was the one who laughed when the old men cursed. Because he was the one who walked upright despite his scar, despite his cloak, despite his bastard blood. In his shadow, they found a kind of freedom.

It wasn't a gang in the romantic sense. No flag-wavers, no blood-sworn oaths. It was more like a pack of wolves, ragged, hungry, dangerous. They met behind the huts, in the woods, on the banks of the streams. They stole, they beat, they hunted. And when the village whispered, it was no longer just "The Bastard." It was "The Bastard and his dogs."

Hannes liked that. He wasn't a leader who barked orders. He was a magnet. His scar, his coat, his eyes—that was enough. People followed because they knew he was moving forward, even though they had all given up long ago.

And he knew: This was just the beginning. A pack of hungry rats in a village. But tomorrow? Tomorrow they could be an entire valley.

The elders had cursed him, the children mocked him, the men beat him. And now he wore the scar on his face like a crest that no one could take away. They had called him a bastard, a devil's spawn, fodder for the gallows—and that was exactly what he burned into his soul.

But when Hannes lay in the straw at night, his coat tightly wrapped around him, his knife at the ready, he could still hear the women's voices in his ears. *"You'll end up on the gallows, bastard."* And he laughed. Not quietly, not bitterly—he laughed loudly, as if he were laughing right in their faces.

He knew they were right. Of course, he would end up on the gallows. Men like him don't die old in bed; they die with rope, steel, or lead. But he swore to

himself: If he fell, he wouldn't fall like an old farmhand in the snow, or like a drunkard in the gutter. No. He would fall like a storm, one that could never be forgotten.

The gang grew, the scars multiplied, and Hannes felt that the village was becoming too small for him. It was a cage full of screams, full of curses, full of envious eyes. Soon he would have to get out. Out into the world, where the hatred was greater, the beer stronger, and the loot richer.

And when he saw the old people cursing after him, he thought: *You won't get rid of me. Even if I hang, I'll live on in your minds.*

So the bastard slowly became a legend – not yet known, not yet feared, but born of scars, curses and hatred.

And as the wind howled through the huts, Hannes swore into the night: "I'll go my way. You prophesied it. But I'll dance to the gallows, and you'll watch."

When fists talk and teeth fly

In the Hunsrück, no one talked for long. Words were cheap, and anyone who talked too much would sooner or later get a punch in the mouth. The language was simple, direct, and honest: Either you're standing or you're lying in the dirt.

Hannes had learned that early on. Curses, insults, threats—all well and good. But in the end, his fists were the deciding factor. When he walked through the village and someone called him a "bastard," he no longer responded with mockery, nor with venom, but with a blow. Straight, hard, without warning. The bastard didn't talk. The bastard beat.

It was a code without rules, and that's precisely what made it so clear. No one questioned right or wrong. No one delivered long sermons. One look, one nudge, and skulls would crash together. Blood on the pavement was as common as horse manure in an alley.

Hannes liked this language. It was simple. Honest. You didn't need books, priests, or a noble title. All you needed were two fists and the will to use them. And Hannes had both.

The gang spoke the same language. Peter, the silent dog, hit harder than all of them. Klos was loud and clumsy, but he threw himself into every fight like he had nine lives. Anna was faster than most of the guys, kicking where it hurt the most. Together they were like a four-fingered fist – and everyone who encountered them knew: This isn't a group, this is a threat.

People increasingly avoided them. Not because they were suddenly as strong as giants, but because they were no longer afraid to speak the language everyone in the Hunsrück understood. A language that didn't say "please" or "thank you." A language that consisted only of broken bones.

And every time Hannes came home with bloody knuckles, chapped lips, and glowing eyes, he thought: *That's how you really talk to the world. With your fists. Everything else is just talk.*

It was market day, the streets full of farmers, traders, and hungry dogs. The snow had melted, the dirt beneath it was steaming, and the air stank of cabbage, manure, and cheap liquor. A perfect day to beat someone's teeth out.

Hannes stood with his gang at the edge, his coat heavy on his shoulders, his eyes alert. A farmer, as tall as a cupboard, stomped by and growled, "Make way, bastard." It wasn't even meant particularly harshly—just offhand. But on this day, it was the wrong word.

Hannes laughed, spat at the man's feet, and said, "Make way. Or I'll make you crawl."

The farmer turned around, stunned, then the first fist flew. Hard, heavy, a blow that would have put a normal boy on his ass. But Hannes stayed standing. He staggered, yes, blood immediately poured from his nose – but he grinned. That crazy grin people already knew.

Then he went for it. One fist in the stomach, one in the face. Peter threw himself at the farmer's back, Klos screamed like a madman and thrashed from the side, Anna deliberately kicked him between the legs. The market exploded. Baskets fell, vegetables rolled through the dirt, chickens fluttered away screeching.

The farmer staggered, tried to defend himself, lashed out wildly. But the gang was like a pack of dogs: from all sides, constantly attacking, never a break. Hannes felt his knuckles crack, the pain shoot up his arm—and he laughed even harder. Blood in his mouth, blood in his eyes, but this feeling that he was alive.

Finally, the farmer lay in the dirt, his face bloody, his hands raised. The crowd stared, whispered, some called for the overseer. Hannes wiped the blood away with his coat sleeve, kicked his ribs once more, and growled: "Next time call me bastard—and you'll be buried lower."

The gang ran away, laughter in their throats, coins from the overturned baskets in their pockets. They were left with a marketplace full of blood, dirt, and fear.

And from that day on, everyone knew: The bastard and his dogs were no longer a rumor. They were here.

After the fight in the market, the whole village was talking about only one thing: the bastard and his dogs. It was no longer a joke, no longer a fantasy. Everyone had seen how they struck, how they fought together as one body. Not heroes, not warriors—but dangerous because they knew no fear.

Hannes sensed that something new had emerged. Once, he had stood alone, armed with a knife and defiance. Now he had a gang. And together they were stronger than any individual farmer, stronger than most of the farmhands, stronger even than the overseers, when they didn't immediately arrive with whips and clubs.

They had no rules, no grand vows. But they understood each other. When Hannes glanced at them, the others knew when to strike. When Anna laughed, everyone knew someone was about to scream. When Peter clenched his fists, it was only a matter of seconds before bones cracked.

The village learned quickly: if you attacked one of them, you got them all. It was like a fist with four fingers—and the thumb was Hannes. He held them together, not with words, but with his mere presence. With the scar on his face, the coat on his shoulders, and that laugh that drove people crazy.

And every time they struck together, Hannes felt his chest swell. Not with friendship, not with love—those were foreign words to him. No, it was pride. Pride that he had something bigger than himself. A pack. A weapon.

The peasants whispered, "The bastard is building his own army." The women cursed, muttered prayers, and spat at him. But deep inside, beneath all the hatred, lay a new note: fear.

And that's exactly what Hannes wanted. Because he knew: A fist can break more than just bones. It can also break down doors. Doors to money. Doors to power. Doors to a world bigger than this cursed village.

Fights leave their mark. Blood, bruises, scars—all normal. But one evening at the tavern, Hannes got something new, something that changed him: his first lost tooth.

It started as usual. Beer, dice, laughter, then a stupid joke. A guy, as broad as a bull, slurred: "That bastard is laughing again, he's laughing like someone who's about to lose his teeth." The crowd roared. Hannes just grinned, stood up—and then the bull's fist crashed into his face.

It wasn't a normal blow. It was the kind that dislodges bones. Hannes immediately felt something crack in his mouth. Blood spurted, a tooth came loose, hung there for a moment—and then he spat it onto the table. A small, white splinter in a pool of blood and beer.

The bar fell silent for a heartbeat. Everyone stared. Hannes, his cheek swollen, his lip open, spat out the tooth—and started laughing. A deep, throaty, insane laugh that shook the walls. "See, you pig," he roared, "now I have a reason to kill you."

Then he struck. With a rage greater than pain. He pounded the bull until his nose was flattened, until the table cracked, until the men intervened. And when they finally restrained him, he was still grinning, the blood in his mouth, the gap in his teeth like a seal on his new truth.

From then on, the tooth was no longer a loss—it was a badge of honor. It showed everyone: This bastard has already lost teeth and is still laughing. He was no longer a boy with baby teeth. He was the kind who knocked out ten more for every tooth he lost.

The old people whispered, "He looks like a robber now." The children stared at him with wide eyes. And Hannes himself looked at himself in the cracked mirror, grinned bloodily, and thought: *Now I finally look like I am.*

A bastard with a gap. A grin full of violence.

Until then, it had always been village versus bastard—farmers, farmhands, drunkards venting their anger on Hannes and his gang. But at some point, it got too big. Too loud. Too much blood on the streets. Too many screams in the tavern. The authorities had to react.

It was a late afternoon. The sun hung low, the village still bustling with the market. Hannes and his dogs stood by the well, laughing after Klos had pushed a merchant into the water. Suddenly, two overseers appeared—whips in hand,

faces cold as iron. "Enough, bastard," one growled. "Now we'll show you where you belong."

The crowd retreated. No one interfered. Everyone wanted to see the bastard finally get his face punched.

The overseers approached him. Tall, powerful, with the muscles of men who had spent their lives enforcing orders. Hannes could have run away. He could have ducked, disappeared, waited for a better moment. But that wasn't his style. He laughed in their faces, pulled his coat tighter, and spat in the snow. "Come on. Show me what authority can do."

The first blow was the whip. It sliced through the air, tearing the skin on his arm. Blood spurted. Hannes didn't even flinch. The second blow came from the other man's fist—heavy, brutal, straight into the ribs. Hannes staggered, coughing up blood, but he stood his ground.

Then he went. Like a dog breaking its muzzle. His fists slammed into the guards' faces, Anna kicked one of them in the back of the knees from behind, Peter rammed his shoulder like a battering ram, and Klos threw himself blindly into the fray. The crowd roared, children screamed, the elderly shrieked prayers.

It was chaos. One guard was bleeding from the nose, the other stumbled backward, his whip in the snow. Hannes laughed, his gaping teeth smeared red, and yelled: "Your superiors are nothing! Just men who bleed!"

In the end, they were torn apart, the dogs chased away, and the overseers left half-dead in the dirt. But the message stuck. The authorities had tried to put down the bastard—and had ended up in the dirt themselves.

From then on, people didn't just whisper "bastard." They said, "The bastard even laughs at the authorities."

After the incident with the guards, nothing was the same. Hannes was no longer just the bastard who was constantly getting into fights. He was now the bully. The name you whispered when someone wanted to cause trouble. The one you didn't want to provoke if you didn't want to go home with a bloody nose.

In the tavern, the men moved their cups aside when he entered the table. Some still mocked him, of course—but they did so with that nervous undertone, as if they were afraid he would strike immediately. On the streets,

the merchants avoided him, the children scurried into the alleys, the women crossed themselves.

And the boys? The ones who had once beaten him up themselves? They now looked up to him. Some came with shining eyes, begging to be allowed to go with him. They wanted to be part of the gang, part of the Fist. Hannes chose. Not everyone. Only those who weren't afraid of seeing blood.

Every new fight made his name bigger. Sometimes at the market, sometimes in a tavern, sometimes simply on the street. One wrong word, one wrong look – and fists would fly. Hannes was no avenger, no hero. He didn't hit because he had to, but because he could. Because he was alive when his bones cracked.

The scar on his face, the gap in his grin, the cloak over his shoulders—all of this became part of his legend. An image everyone had in their minds: the bastard laughing while blood drips.

And so the hatred, the ridicule, the beatings of his childhood became his capital. Every blow he had received now paid off. Every curse from his elders, every slap from his mother, every taunt from his children had made him what he was now: a name that hung in the air like a threat in the bars.

The bastard was no longer just someone to be mocked. He was someone to be feared.

His fists had given him a name. The bastard had become the thug, and the village now whispered his name in low voices, like one speaks of an illness that can strike anyone. Anyone who met him knew: one wrong word, and you'd spit blood.

But Hannes also realized: his fists alone were no longer enough. Every blow, every fight, every broken bone made him bigger in people's minds – but he felt there was more out there waiting. More than farmers lying in the dirt. More than overseers going home with broken noses.

At night, as he lay in the straw, his fingers sore, his knuckles swollen, he thought: *Things can't stay like this.* Fists are good, yes. But fists are just the beginning. If he really wanted to become great, he needed more. Knives. Horses. Weapons. Men who would follow him not just out of fear, but out of hunger.

His gang half-understood. Klos was already dreaming of great loot, of carts full of wine. Anna wanted jewelry, clothes, gold. Peter remained silent, as always,

but that sparkle burned in his eyes, too. They all knew: the next step was coming.

And Hannes? He sensed that the fists, bloody as they were, were just the beginning. Soon he would be taking things bigger than a mug of beer or a few coins. Soon he would be leaving the village behind.

Because beatings earn respect. But respect alone doesn't fill a belly or build a legend.

And Hannes wanted both.

The first raid

Bar fights, stolen loaves of bread, a coat off a merchant's back—all that was well and good. But Hannes was fed up with petty stuff. He wanted more. He wanted his name to become bigger than a mocking village song. And he knew that would require something that couldn't be overlooked: a real robbery.

It was a cold, quiet night, smoke from the chimneys hanging lazily in the air. The gang huddled in the barn, the fire flickering, their faces hard as stone. Hannes stood up, the scar across his face gleaming in the firelight, and for the first time, he spoke like a leader:

"Enough of the crumbs. We'll take the bread now. A wagon. A merchant. There's enough people out there driving through, heavily laden, alone, fed up, stupid. We'll lie in wait. We'll take what we want."

Klos grinned, drunk as ever, and beat his chest: "Finally! A real blow!" Anna looked at him sharply, her eyes dark and sparkling: "And if it goes wrong? Then we'll hang the next morning." "Then we'll hang," Hannes growled. "I'd rather hang than continue eating rats." Peter said nothing. He just stared into the fire, clenched his fists, and his silence conveyed more agreement than any words.

Hannes stepped closer to the fire, drew the knife, and held it up. "We are no longer children. We are not beggars. We are dogs who bite. And tomorrow, we'll bite our fill."

The gang remained silent. But everyone knew there was no way back. With this plan, the next step had been taken.

Outside, the wind howled, as if it had understood that from now on, the village would tell a different story. A story of blood and iron.

A plan is only as good as the blades that carry it out. And Hannes knew: if they wanted to pull this off, there couldn't be any mistakes.

The gang gathered everything they had. A few rusty knives, a hammer, and an axe they'd stolen from a farmer. Anna brought a bundle of stones, round and heavy, good for throwing. Klos had a piece of chain that he swung like a whip while laughing like a madman. Peter brought nothing—except his fists, and they were harder than any iron.

In the barn, Hannes sharpened his knife on an old stone. Sparks flew, the blade becoming thin, sharp, dangerous. He held it up, gazing at the gleam in the firelight. "This," he murmured, "is our bread. Our wine. Our life."

They rehearsed the ambush, as ridiculous as it looked. Anna played the dealer, Klos jumped on her, Peter held her, and Hannes plunged the knife into the wood, just missing her throat. Then they laughed, a hoarse, hungry laugh that betrayed more fear than they wanted to admit.

"And if he's armed?" Anna asked. Hannes grinned. "Then he'll die faster." "And if there are guards around?" "Then they'll die too."

His words were cold, but a fire flickered in his eyes. Of course, he was afraid. Only a fool goes into a robbery without fear. But he hid it behind that grin that made everyone else believe he was untouchable.

By the end of the night, the decision had been made. Tomorrow they would take the forest path, past the old oak tree. Every trader passed by, whether by cart or on foot. They would wait there.

The gang crawled into the straw; no one slept properly. Everyone stared into the darkness, heard the creaking of the beams, the howling of the wind. And everyone thought the same thing: Tomorrow there will be blood.

The morning was gray and cold, fog hung over the hills like a shroud. The gang crept silently through the forest, every step cracking in the frost. No one spoke, no one laughed. Today was not a day for mockery—today was a day for the knife.

They reached the old oak, a thick, crooked tree by the path. There they positioned themselves. Anna crouched in the undergrowth, Klos crouched behind a rock, Peter stood broadly in the shade, and Hannes leaned against the bark, the knife loosely held in his hand, his eyes black and alert.

The minutes dragged on like hours. Every breath steamed, every bird call sounded like a warning. The hunger in my stomach was forgotten, as was the cold in my bones – everything was tense, a single nerve on the verge of snapping.

Then they heard him. The creaking of wheels. The snorting of a horse. The metallic clang of a heavily laden wagon.

Hannes felt his heart beat faster. Not out of fear—out of greed. This wasn't just stealing breadcrumbs. This was prey, growling like an animal about to be killed.

He raised his hand, the signal. Everything fell silent. The wagon approached, the fog settled over the street like a veil. The merchant, thickly muffled, his collar turned up, hummed a song to break the silence.

A few more steps. One more breath.

"Now," whispered Hannes.

Klos jumped out first, swinging the chain, which rattled against the horses. Anna threw stones that thundered against the wagon. Peter grabbed the horse by the reins and pulled it to the side. And Hannes himself stepped into the middle of the path, knife raised, the scar on his face like a bloody seal.

"Get off the wagon!" he yelled. "Everything here belongs to us now!"

The merchant's eyes widened. The fog, the screaming, the weapons—everything came over him like a storm. He grabbed for something under the tarpaulin, but Peter was faster, ripped it off, and threw it into the dirt. The horse neighed, the wagon swayed, and the morning burst open like a tumor filled with chaos.

And Hannes laughed. Because he knew: They had him.

The merchant lay in the mud, the horse brayed, the cart rocked. It was no longer a quick grab for a loaf of bread—it was a war on a small scale.

The man was stronger than they had thought. With one fist, he rammed Peter back, causing him to stagger and let go of the horse. With the other, he pulled a small knife from his pocket. His eyes were wide, full of panic, but also full of rage. "Damned dogs!" he screamed.

Hannes immediately approached him. No fear, no hesitation. He grabbed him by the collar, the blade of his knife flashing, and in a second they were at each other's mercy. The merchant stabbed, Hannes felt the point rip through his shirt, scratching the skin on his side—but he laughed. That crazy laugh that made him invincible. "Come on, bastard! Blood against blood!"

Anna jumped onto the man's back, clinging on, while Klos slammed down with the chain. A dull thud, a scream, blood splattered on the snow. Peter, back on his feet, pounded him with his fists until he was gasping for breath.

The wagon tipped to the side, a barrel rolled out, shattered, and flour sprayed into the air like smoke. White dust, red blood, black fog—the morning transformed into a single hellish scene.

Hannes pressed the knife to the man's neck, so close that the skin stretched. "Give it up," he snarled. "You're alone. There are many of us."

The merchant gasped for air, blood pouring from his nose. He dropped the knife, his hands shaking, and he gasped like an animal caught in a net.

And in that moment, Hannes felt for the first time what it was like to have a life in his hands. Not a fight, not a taunt, not a game – real power. The power to decide whether the man continued to breathe or not.

He could have killed him. Maybe he wanted to. But Anna screamed, "Hurry up, we have to get the loot!" So Hannes pushed him into the snow, spat in his face, and yelled, "You're still alive—but only because I want you to."

Then they pounced on the cart. They tore down barrels, pulled sacks from the cart, and stuffed coins into their pockets. It was chaos, greedy, hasty—like wolves tearing real meat for the first time.

And Hannes was still laughing. Blood was running down his side, the merchant was wheezing in the snow—and he felt as if he had just opened the door to a new world.

The wagon wasn't a treasure house, a royal retinue, or a gold transport. But for Hannes and his gang, it was pure wealth.

A barrel full of flour—shattered, dust everywhere, they shoveled the remains into sacks. A few pieces of bacon, salty, greasy, smelling like paradise itself. Two jugs of liquor, cheap but strong enough to burn the chill from their bones. Plus a bag of coins, clinking, glinting in the dim light—not much, perhaps enough for a few nights in the tavern, but a fortune to them.

Klos laughed like a madman, snatched the barrel, half his face covered in flour, like a clown of misery. "We're eating like kings today!" Anna stuffed the coins into her skirt, her eyes glittering greedily. "This is just the beginning." Peter carried the bags silently, as if they were lighter than air, pride in his eyes.

And Hannes? Hannes stood in the fog, his side bloody, his knife still red, his cloak heavy from the fight—and grinned. The loot wasn't great, not even as much as he'd seen in his dreams. But it was a sign that they could do it. They had stopped a wagon, wrestled a man to the ground, and taken loot. They were no longer children, no longer bastards, no longer beggars. They were robbers.

The merchant was still lying in the snow, gasping, half-conscious. Hannes saw him, considered for a moment whether to kill him—then shook his head. "Let him. Let him tell us. Let him tell everyone we're here."

The others looked at him, confused, but they didn't contradict him. And Hannes knew: This was exactly what he needed. Not just loot, but stories. Stories that grow, that are carried from village to village. Stories of a bastard with a scar and a cloak who had robbed the first wagon.

They dragged their loot into the forest, stumbling, laughing, and drinking. Flour in their hair, blood on their hands, and liquor in their stomachs. It was dirty, miserable, and small—but it was their first victory.

And Hannes swore to himself: The next car would be bigger. Much bigger.

The merchant survived. Hannes had deliberately left him alive, not out of pity—pity was a foreign word to him—but out of calculation. A dead man brings only silence. A survivor brings talk. And talk was the currency he needed now.

And the gossip began. Even the next day, the women at the well whispered that the bastard and his dogs had attacked a wagon. The men in the tavern

spat into their beer and said, "It was just a merchant, a miserable bunch." But their voices had that undertone, that flicker in their eyes: fear.

The authorities also noticed. An overseer came to the village, questioned the merchant, and promised that "measures" would be taken. Whips, punishments, perhaps even a patrol of the streets. But the people knew: the authorities were far away, the roads were long, the forests deep. A few bastards couldn't be hunted down so easily.

Hannes heard all this – and grinned. That was exactly what he wanted. Not just the loot, not just bread and schnapps. No, he wanted the name. He wanted everyone crossing the Hunsrück to know: There are dogs lurking out there. And their leader has a scar on his face and a laugh louder than death.

In the barn, they celebrated like kings. The bacon sizzled in the fire, the flour turned into bread, the schnapps flowed like water. They ate, drank, and laughed as if they had conquered the world. Klos staggered around the fire singing, Anna counted the coins over and over again, Peter sat silent, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that spoke louder than words.

And Hannes? He sat with his coat over his shoulders, his legs spread, his knife beside him, and he knew: Now it was all over. The people were afraid, the authorities had become aware, and his gang had tasted blood.

A bastard had become a thug. A thug had become a robber. And a robber—soon—a legend.

The night after the attack was quiet. The fire crackled, stomachs were full, the liquor burned warm in their throats. For the first time in a long time, the gang slept soundly and contentedly. But Hannes lay awake, his coat tightly around his shoulders, his knife at his chest.

He thought of the wagon. Of the merchant's scream. Of the blood in the snow. Of the feeling of having the blade at his throat and deciding for himself whether he lived or died. This feeling burned deeper than any beer, deeper than any blow. It hadn't been a fight anymore, no longer a child's play. It had been power. Pure, naked power.

And he knew: This was just the beginning.

Tomorrow they would talk. Everywhere. From Mainz to Frankfurt, from every village to the nearest tavern. "The Bastard with the Scar" – that's what they

would call him. And every merchant traveling the roads would think twice about traveling alone. Fear was now his companion. Fear was his currency.

The gang snored around him, Klos with her mouth open, Anna curled up like a cat, Peter silent, his fists still clenched in his sleep. Hannes looked at them and knew: This was more than a pack of stray dogs. This was a seed. A seed that would grow, that would soon fill entire regions with fear.

The elders had said he would end up on the gallows. Perhaps that was true. But Hannes swore to himself: Before he hung there, the world would know his name. Not as a bastard. Not as a beggar. But as Schinderhannes.

And out in the forest, in the darkness, the wind seemed to be whispering his name.

A king of dirt and liquor

The door burst open like a mouth spewing mud and smoke. And in stepped Hannes. No longer a bastard, no longer a street dog—but like someone who thinks he's king. His coat heavy on his shoulders, a scar across his face, a gap-toothed grin like a cursed crest. Behind him were his gang: Klos with a chain around his neck, Anna with eyes like glowing coals, Peter silent but with fists that could split trees.

The tavern fell silent for a moment. Not completely—but enough to hear the crackling of the fire, the dripping of liquor on wood, the twitching of the men's faces as they wondered: Who the hell does this bastard think he is?

Hannes enjoyed this. This moment of silence, this flicker of fear in his eyes. He stepped into the middle of the room, kicked back a chair, and sat down as if he had the right to do so. Not in the corner, not at the edge—no, right in the middle, on the spot where the peasant leaders usually sat.

"Pour!" he yelled. His voice was hoarse, ragged, but it cut through the room like a knife. The innkeeper, a fat, sweaty dog, hesitated. Then he placed the largest jug he had in front of him. Full, foaming, golden.

Klos laughed, Anna stepped onto the bench with a swing, spreading her arms like a queen without a kingdom. Peter stood behind Hannes, a shadow, a silent threat.

And Hannes? He grabbed the mug, lifted it up, the beer spilled over the rim, and grinned at the crowd. "Well?" he growled. "Who wants to say something? Who wants to contradict me?"

No one did. Some lowered their eyes, others forced a laugh, a few murmured quietly. But no one stood up.

In this moment, in this smoke, in this stench of sweat and liquor, he, the bastard, was the king. A king made of dirt, but a king.

Hannes raised the jug like a crown, heavy, dripping, gleaming in the light of the sooty candles. The foam ran over his fingers, but he didn't care. He stood up, legs wide apart, the gap in his grin like a seal.

"To us!" he roared. "To the dogs that bite! To the bastards who take your bread from the table while you're still praying!"

The gang roared. Klos downed his mug in one gulp, half the beer running down his chest, laughing like a madman. Anna swung her skirt, twirled on the bench, her voice sharp as glass: "To the bastard who has more balls than all the men here combined!" Peter just nodded, drank, and his silence spoke louder than any words.

The rest of the pub was silent. Some hesitantly raised their mugs, others remained silent. But they were listening. And that was precisely the triumph.

Hannes raised the mug to his lips and drank deeply, long and greedily. The beer flowed like fire down his throat, not burning, but warming. He felt it making him taller, heavier, stronger. He slammed the mug down on the table, the wood splintered, and he laughed.

"Do you see it?" he cried, his face red, his scar shining. "You have your kings in Mainz, in Frankfurt, in Paris. But here—here you have me!"

A few men grumbled, laughed nervously, a few whores clapped in the background. The innkeeper wiped the sweat from his forehead, as if afraid that the bastard would destroy the entire tavern if he didn't play along.

And Hannes stood there, a bloody, dirty king without a crown, with only a jug in his hand – and he felt as if the world belonged to him.

The beer was just the beginning. Soon the jugs of schnapps arrived—clear, sharp, like fire in a glass. The innkeeper placed them on the table, trembling, as if he already knew he was feeding the devil alcohol.

Hannes reached for it, gulped down the first glass like water. It burned his throat, bit his stomach, and he laughed. "This is my crown!" he roared, holding the glass up as if it were gold. "No velvet, no scepter—just schnapps! And it fits me better than any damn crown!"

The crowd cheered. Klos almost fell off the bench, howling with laughter and then toppling over. Anna licked a drop from the rim of her glass, bit her lip, and screamed, "A king, yes! But a king who takes what he wants for himself!" Peter drank silently, his gaze hard as stone, but even he couldn't hide the twinkle in his eyes.

The bar erupted. Some laughed along, others grimaced, whispered. A few men spat on the floor, as if to show they didn't approve. But their hands trembled, their eyes betrayed the opposite: fear and envy.

Hannes felt the liquor making him taller. Every sip was a step further away from the bastard, further away from the filth of his birth. Every drop was proof that he now ruled—over scoundrels, over dogs, over misery.

He stood up, spread his arms, his cloak slipping from his shoulders, the knife flashing at his belt. "I am the king of dirt and liquor!" he shouted. "And as long as I drink, as long as I breathe, everything you have is mine!"

The sentence echoed through the dive, mingling with smoke and sweat, and in that moment, he truly was: king. Not over lands, not over castles—but over the swamp in which he lived.

And he loved it.

The tavern had long since gotten out of control. Smoke hung thickly from the ceiling, mugs were flying, liquor was flowing like a dirty stream, and in the middle of it all, Hannes' gang was raging like a pack of starving wolves.

Klos stood on a table, unsteady, his shirt open, the chain in his hand like a crown. He sang something that sounded like a song, but consisted only of curses and drunken yelling. Every other verse ended with a belch, but the crowd laughed and roared along.

Anna danced on the benches. Her skirts swirled, her boots thumped on the wood, as she laughed in the men's faces. One grabbed her, she knocked his tooth loose with her fist, and screamed, "Only the king may touch me!" Then she pointed at Hannes, who nodded back with a bloody grin.

Peter sat at the table like a bastion, silent, arms crossed, but anyone who came too close received that look—cold, sinister, so heavy it was worse than any fist. He was the king's shadow, the guardian, showing: If you touch the bastard, I'll break you.

And Hannes himself? He reigned over it all, his coat half-open, his mug never empty, his knife glinting in the candlelight. He toasted, drank, laughed, spat beer on the floor, and roared: "See, you dogs? I'm your king, and you eat out of my hand—whether you want it or not!"

A few of the farmers caved, laughed along, pretended they were part of the spectacle. Others retreated, muttering dark words, cursing under their breath. But no one dared to attack him directly. Not that evening. Not while the gang raged like a storm in the mud.

It wasn't a celebration. It was a coronation. Loud, dirty, full of blood and booze—exactly the kind of accession to the throne Hannes deserved.

No matter how much the gang roared, how loudly Klos sang, how wildly Anna danced, the rest of the tavern didn't join in. Some laughed, yes, but it was the kind of forced laughter that gets stuck in your throat. Others crouched silently in the corners, clutching their mugs tightly, as if hoping to become invisible.

The farmers, the farmhands, the merchants—they didn't raise their glasses. They just watched. Some with pure hatred, others with that silent fear that sits deep in their bones. For them, Hannes was no king. He was just a bastard with a knife and a cloak, a dog who had grown just big enough to be kicked no longer. But a dog is still a dog.

An old man at the bar muttered loudly enough for everyone to hear: "A king? Pah. A king needs a crown, land, and people. That one just has booze and dirt." The murmuring crawled through the crowd like a worm, and suddenly a few nodded, others grinned crookedly.

Hannes heard it. Of course he heard it. His ears were as sharp as the blade on his belt. He saw the downcast eyes, the crossed arms, the faces that saw him not as a ruler, but as a clown in a coat.

It stung deeper than any fist. He stood up, staggering from the liquor, and spread his arms. "You don't want me? You're laughing at me? Then come here! Come, take the throne!"

No one moved. A few just grinned, others stared into their mugs. It was the silence that was worse than any mockery.

And in this silence, Hannes understood: He could call himself king, he could drink like one, roar like one, rule his dogs – but in the eyes of the people, he was nothing more than a bastard sitting on a shaky chair.

A king made of dirt. A king made of liquor. And both will slip through your fingers if you grip it too tightly.

It was clear that someone would dare. Someone always dares. A peasant lout, barely older than Hannes, his face red from liquor and stupidity, stood up. He grinned crookedly, his eyes glazed over, and shouted: "King? King of what? Of rats, of whores, of drunkards? You're nothing, bastard! Nothing more than dirt in the snow."

The laughter was sharp, pointed, like knives scraping against bone. A few clapped, one whistled. And at that moment, the air shifted.

Hannes stood up, slowly, without blinking. The jug in his hand, heavy and dripping, like a second weapon. He walked toward the boy, each step muffled like a drumbeat. The laughter faded until only the crackling of the fire could be heard.

"Say it again," Hannes growled, and his grin was no longer a grin. It was an animal's teeth.

The boy took a breath – but he couldn't go any further. The mug smashed his face, spraying glass, beer, and blood into the crowd. He fell like a sack, screaming, his hands covered in splinters, his eye swollen shut.

Silence. Breathless silence.

Then Hannes kicked again. A hard, brutal kick to the ribs. Another. Another. Every blow a law: *That's not how you talk to a king.*

Anna laughed shrilly, Klos roared, Peter stood beside her, arms crossed. No one intervened. The boy whimpered, wheezed, crawled in his own blood—and Hannes spat on him.

"You see?" he roared into the crowd. "That's how you talk to kings! Anyone who contradicts me won't speak tomorrow!"

No one was laughing anymore. No one was clapping. Everyone was staring. Fear, disgust, respect—all in their faces, all mixed up.

And Hannes stood there, bloody, staggering, the knife at his belt, the jug broken—and he truly looked like a king. A king made of violence. A king made of filth. A king made of liquor.

The tavern stank of liquor, blood, and fear. The boy still lay in the dirt, gasping, with a glass in his face and beer in his hair. No one dared to pick him up. No one dared to look at Hannes. They all stared into their mugs as if they had suddenly gone blind.

Hannes sat down again, heavily laden, his coat over his shoulders, the knife on the table. His breathing was labored, the schnapps rushed through his veins, and in his eyes flickered the fire of something greater than himself.

For a moment, he truly believed it: He was king. Not of Mainz, not of Frankfurt, not of castles and palaces. But of this room. Of these faces. Of this filth. A king of blood, smoke, and cheap liquor.

But deep inside, something gnawed at him. He knew that kings aren't made of liquor. That glass crowns shatter if you grip them too tightly. He knew that everything he was tonight would lie back in the gutter with the dawn, between vomit and cold ash.

But he didn't care. He grinned, his gaping teeth bleeding, and lifted the last drop from a jug. "Tomorrow, perhaps the gallows," he muttered. "Today I'm king."

The crowd roared, laughed, and drank along. The barman nervously wiped the counter, the customers avoided his gaze, and outside the wind whipped against the shutters as if issuing a warning.

And Hannes, half drunk, half dreaming, knew: This was just a taste. A king made of dirt and liquor was just the beginning. Soon he'd take more. Much more.

The dives of Mainz

The city smelled before you saw it. A stench of smoke, manure, sweat, beer, and a thousand lives boiling, packed together between the walls. For Hannes and his gang, it was like stepping into the jaws of a giant—and the giant had bad teeth.

The alleys were narrow, noisy, packed with people who didn't have time to turn around. Merchants shouted their wares, children cried for bread, prostitutes screamed for customers, and somewhere bells tolled as if they could drown out all the misery.

Klos stopped, his mouth open like an ox seeing more than ten people in one place for the first time. "Shit," he muttered, "it stinks even worse here than at home." Anna grinned crookedly, her eyes gliding over the crowd. "No one notices when we strike here. Here, we're just a shadow among a thousand." Peter remained silent, as always, but his fists opened and closed as if they wanted to grab all the noise and crush it.

And Hannes? Hannes soaked it all up. The noise, the stench, the chaos—it was like a slap in the face, and he loved it. He was no longer a bastard running through a village where everyone knew his name. Here he was free. Here he could reinvent himself.

The city walls towered high, the gates stood open, wagons rolled in and out. Horses neighed, soldiers marched, beggars crawled in the dirt. Everywhere life, everywhere hunger, everywhere greed.

Hannes laughed. A short, harsh laugh that made his gang sit up and take notice. "Here," he growled, "this is our playground. This is where things get serious."

And with every step deeper into the alleys, he knew: Mainz was not just a city. Mainz was a battlefield. And he had come to fight.

The taverns of Mainz were no longer village pubs where a few peasants spilled beer and a landlord cursed with greasy hands. No – this was a different beast. Every dive was a belly full of noise, smoke, and damned misery.

The first one they entered was so dark you could barely see your own hand. The floor was sticky with beer, the air so thick you could chew it. At the tables sat men with scars who told more stories than any village woman. Mercenaries who had seen more blood in war than Hannes could ever imagine. Merchants

with bellies too fat and hands too fast. Gamblers slamming their last coins onto the table, eyes so greedy they devoured the very shadows.

And in the middle of it all were the whores. Not like the washed-up women from the village, who already looked like leather at twenty. No, here were young faces, painted, with clothes that revealed more than they concealed. But also the old ones, with cracked lips and voices like rusty nails, who still found customers.

Klos stumbled straight to the first table, grabbed a cup, and drank as if it belonged to him. Anna laughed, knelt between two players, and stole a coin while they were still arguing. Peter stood like a tower against the wall, his eyes dark, ready to knock down anyone who came too close.

And Hannes? Hannes walked through the middle of the room. His coat dirty, his scar shiny, his grin wide. Some looked up, some laughed, some spat. But no one ignored him.

He didn't order a mug. He took one. From a man who was about to drink. The guy was about to protest – until he saw Hannes' eyes. Black, cold, full of violence. Then he fell silent.

The gang had arrived. Not as guests. As intruders.

And Hannes knew: This was exactly where he wanted to be. In this stinking, loud, greedy filth, where you either ate or were eaten.

The dives of Mainz were like a market of the damned. Everyone who crept in brought a different story, and none of them ended well. For Hannes, it was like a window into the future: this is what you could become if you lived in the filth long enough.

There was the mercenary with half an ear, who told everyone how he'd fought the French in Italy, his hand never leaving his knife handle. A gambler with yellowed cards that he treated like relics, even though everyone knew he'd marked them. A whore with a face like crumpled leather who nevertheless laughed so loudly that men ran after her like dogs.

Hannes absorbed the faces. Each of them was stronger, more experienced, more dangerous than the farmers in his village. But they were also more broken. They had seen more, lost more. And that made them vulnerable.

One came straight up to him. A fat dealer with a gold tooth that smelled of cheap perfume. "New here?" he slurred, placing his hand on Hannes' shoulder. "Watch out, boy. Mainz will eat you if you don't pay." Hannes just grinned, showed his scar, and whispered, "I'll bite back."

The whores whispered about him, laughed, and examined the coat. One shouted, "Nice material for such a bastard!" Anna growled back, "That coat has seen more blood than you've seen coins."—and the whore fell silent.

At the edge sat two men with cold eyes who wouldn't touch a beer. They watched Hannes, scrutinized his gang, and he sensed: This wasn't a game. This was a test. Everyone here was testing him to see if he was just a pompous bastard or someone who could stay.

And Hannes? He enjoyed it. Those glances, those whispers. For him, it was confirmation. He was in the game. A small but visible king – in a kingdom full of dogs, thieves, and lost souls.

The cards were greasy, yellowed, and frayed at the edges—but they were worth their weight in gold if you knew how to play them. And that's exactly what Mainz was all about: not just drinking, not just fucking, but betting, bluffing, losing, winning.

Hannes had been familiar with dice, small games in the villages, farmers throwing their last copper pieces onto the table. But here it was different. Here, bags of coins, knives, trinkets, even half a fur lay on the table. Enough stakes to keep a man fed for weeks—or drive him to ruin.

"Sit down," growled an old player with eyes like two holes in rotten earth. "If you've got any balls." Hannes grinned, pulled his coat tighter, and sat down. The gang stayed close to him: Anna right behind his shoulder, Klos nervously rocking, Peter as still as a stone.

The first few rounds were tough. Hannes lost. Fast. A few coins he had from his last loot disappeared like water in the sand. The men laughed, mocked, one even nearly spat in his face. "King of dirt, huh? You're just a pawn here, boy."

Hannes' eyes flashed. He remained calm, drank, and continued playing. He watched the fingers, the twitches in the faces, the slight tremors when someone was bluffing. He saw when someone was looking too deeply into the glass, when someone was laying down the cards too quickly.

And then he turned it over. A bold bet, bigger than they thought. Dice rolled, cards slammed onto the table—and Hannes grinned as he pocketed the loot. The old gambler cursed, the others growled, but the coins rolled to him.

"Remember this," he said quietly, his voice cold as steel. "I like losing. But only until you think I'm weak. Then I'll take everything from you."

The crowd behind him murmured, the whores giggled, and even the toughest players looked at him differently. The bastard didn't just have fists. He had brains.

And in that moment, Hannes knew: gambling was blood without a knife. And he loved it.

It was bound to happen. Whenever coins change tables, whenever one person laughs and the other loses, there's blood. Mainz was no exception—just bigger, harder, more brutal.

A mercenary, broad-shouldered, his face scarred, slammed his fist on the table. "The bastard cheated!" he roared. That was the spark. The rest was fire.

The table tipped, cups flew, cards and dice whirled through the air. Hannes jumped up, knife in hand, his eyes black with rage. Peter struck the first man down so hard that his head crashed against the wall like a stone. Klos swung his chain, hitting one man in the face, teeth flying across the floor. Anna climbed onto a player's back, pulling his hair, screaming like a fury.

The mercenary rushed at Hannes. A mountain of flesh and steel, his veins thick, his breath stank of stale beer. Hannes narrowly dodged, the knife sliced across his arm, blood spurted, and the man bellowed like an animal.

The entire dive was in uproar. Men were fighting each other without knowing why. Whores screamed, chairs broke, beer spilled over tables, the barman shouted in vain for them to stop. It was a storm of fists, splinters, and screams.

Hannes finally landed a blow—the knife plunged into the mercenary's side, deep enough to bring the giant to his knees. The bastard grabbed him by the hair, yanked his head up, spat in his face, and roared: "This is Mainz, you dog, and I rule here!"

Then he dropped him. The guy rolled around in his own blood, gasping, while the gang laughed, panted, and sweated.

When the tavern finally fell silent, men lay on the floor, bloody, groaning, some motionless. Hannes was still standing, bloody, laughing, the knife dripping in his hand.

And everyone who saw him knew: This was no longer a farming village. This was Mainz. And the bastard had just shown that he could survive here, too.

The dive was a battlefield. Blood in the beer, splinters in the straw, men groaning in the dirt. The landlord stood trembling behind the bar, the prostitutes collected coins from the tables as if nothing had happened. And in the middle of it all stood Hannes.

His coat was soaked with beer and blood, the scar glistened from a fresh rip, the knife dripping red. He stood with his legs wide apart, his gap-toothed grin on, and looked around as if he owned the whole damn room.

Klos crouched beside him, his face covered in blood, but laughing like a madman. Anna tucked a stolen coin into her cleavage and winked at Hannes, as if she knew she was participating in something bigger. Peter stood like a tower next to the table, silent, with a fist the size of a paving stone.

And the others? They stared. Even those who hated him. Even those who wanted to kill him. No one moved. No one dared to tell him to his face that he was just a bastard.

In that moment, he was king. Not over land, not over castles, not over a people—but over dirt, fear, and liquor. A small king, yes. But a king.

He sat down on the overturned table, placed the knife in front of him, reached for a half-full cup, and raised it. "That's it," he growled. "I'll take what I want. And none of you will stop me."

No one objected. The room smelled of blood and smoke, and Hannes absorbed it like perfume.

It wasn't a coronation with a crown and scepter. It was a coronation with beer and swords. And he preferred that.

The night in Mainz didn't end with songs. It ended with blood in the straw, with broken chairs, and faces disappearing into the shadows. The innkeeper closed the shutters, as if glad that the bastard and his dogs were finally leaving.

Hannes stepped out into the cold air, his coat heavy, his knife not yet completely clean. The smoke of the city hung over the alleys, voices from dozens of taverns echoed like a chorus of the damned. And Hannes knew: Here, in Mainz, he was no longer just the terror of a village. Here he was a player on a larger stage.

But he wasn't alone. In the eyes that followed him lay curiosity, fear—and envy. Everyone in this city wanted more. Everyone wanted to survive, no matter who had to pay the price. And Hannes sensed: sooner or later, he wouldn't just defeat peasants or mercenaries. Here, enemies waited, tougher, smarter, and more ruthless than anything he'd ever known.

He grinned anyway. His gaping teeth glistened red, and he murmured, "Let them come. I'm ready."

The gang trudged behind him, Klos slurring his words, Anna with coins in her hand, Peter silent as always. They weren't an army. They weren't a court. But they were enough to leave the first scar on this city.

And as the bells tolled over Mainz, Hannes knew: This was just the beginning. Soon the city would whisper his name—not as Bastard, but as Schinderhannes.

Cards, dice and broken promises

The cards lay greasy and heavy on the table, the dice rolled across the wood like small bones. For most, it was a pastime, a way to pass the time alongside the intoxication of liquor and whores. For Hannes, it was war.

He'd learned: With fists, you can knock out a man's teeth. With knives, you can tear his skin. But with cards and dice? You can steal his heart, coin by coin, until he's left with nothing but a blank stare and trembling hands.

The taverns of Mainz were full of such characters: men who placed their last hope in a piece of parchment or the roll of two dice. Losers who sank a little further into the mud with each throw. Winners who were kings for a few hours before losing everything again.

Hannes loved that. It was like a battle without blood – at least at the beginning. One table, one bet, one bluff – and suddenly someone was exposed. Not on the ground, but in their souls. And he understood: At the gaming table, everyone is

naked. No armor, no nobility, no title protects you. Only your courage and your lies.

He didn't gamble because he needed money. Money was a means to beer, bread, and whores. He gambled because he wanted to see men break. See their faces crumble when the cards didn't fall as hoped. See their hands tremble when they realized the bastard was taking their last.

"This is war," he once muttered as he rolled the dice. "And I've never lost a war."

The gang half-understood. Klos laughed when he won and cried when he lost. Anna played with her eyes, stealing more from the next table than she bet. Peter simply stood behind Hannes, silent as a shadow, and everyone knew: anyone who accused him of gambling was risking more than just coins.

Thus, the table became a battlefield. And Hannes became the general, leading his army with dice and lies.

The first few rolls fell like gifts from the devil. Hannes won. Again and again. Coins clinked on the table, cups filled up, faces around him grew emptier. And every time he rolled the dice across the wood, he felt something rising within him—a hot fever stronger than liquor, harder than blood.

It wasn't luck, he told himself. Luck was for peasants, for fools who prayed for heaven to send them a blessing. No—it was his will. He forced the dice to fall that way. He forced the cards to bow to him. He was the bastard who pocketed fate himself.

The men at the table cursed, one banged his fist on the wood, another sweated as if he were playing for his life. Whores crowded behind Hannes, giggling, stroking his shoulders as if they'd already smelled his purse getting fuller. Klos howled with laughter, Anna counted the coins with flashing eyes, Peter stood like a statue, his shadow falling heavily on the other players.

Hannes grinned, his gap-toothed teeth shining, the scar running red across his face. "See it?" he shouted, pushing the next bet into the middle. "This isn't a game. This is my throne."

The fever gripped him. Every win made him greedier, hungrier. He felt untouchable, as if the world would fall to him as long as he just rolled the dice. And as the crowd murmured, as the beer flowed, as the smoke blackened the ceiling, Hannes truly believed for a moment: He couldn't lose.

A king – this time not made of liquor, but of dice and cards.

But deep in his stomach, a hunger for more was already gnawing. And hunger is the brother of the fall.

The fever of winning was blinding. At first, the coins were like rain that never stopped falling. But rain turns to mud, and mud eats you.

The cards spun. Slowly at first, almost invisibly – a lost bet, a die that rolled too low. Then faster. Two rounds, three rounds, half the loot was gone. The faces at the table grew harder, the looks more venomous. The laughter died down.

Hannes felt the blood rush to his head. Every loss was a slap in the face. He growled, betting higher and higher, like a man who believes he can force the world to serve him again. But the dice laughed. The cards spat in his face.

"The bastard loses," someone whispered, and it was like a knife in the back. Anna snarled, grabbing his shoulder. "Stop it, Hannes. We've had enough." But he pushed her away, his eyes black with rage. "Not yet. Not again. I'll take it back."

Klos whimpered, half drunk, his hands full of empty cups. Peter stood motionless, but his brow furrowed, as if he knew this was going wrong.

And Hannes? Hannes was trapped. Every loss made him furious, every throw was like a slugfest with the devil himself. He couldn't stop. Not now. Not with everyone watching.

He was no longer a king at the table. He was a hunted man, desperately grasping for a crown that kept slipping away.

The trap of losses snapped shut – and Hannes bit into it as if he could tear it apart.

It began with a whisper. "I swear, I'll give it back to you tomorrow." A shabby gambler, trembling, sweaty, his fingers clammy around the last cup. He asked Hannes for a coin, just one, so he could keep rolling. He promised he would pay back double, swore by God, by his mother, by everything he held sacred.

Hannes grinned. He gave him the coin. Not out of kindness, but because he wanted to see how quickly the man would lie.

And of course he lied. The guy gambled away the money in one go, lost, and when Hannes grabbed him by the collar, all he could do was stammer, "Next time, bastard, next time!"

It wasn't just him. Even within the gang, rifts were opening. Klos, while drunk, had stolen a few coins from the shared purse. Anna caught him and punched him so hard he vomited. Peter remained silent, as always, but his gaze rested heavily on Hannes: *You lose control.*

Broken promises hung in the air like smoke. Everyone swore, everyone lied, everyone broke their word when it came to survival.

And Hannes understood: In the dives of Mainz, a promise was worth less than a spilled drop of liquor. Words were cheap. Only coins and knives counted.

He grabbed the trembling player and pressed his face to the table, so that the cards cut into his skin. "Your word," he growled, "is worth less than my filth." Then he pushed him aside, leaving him bleeding in the straw.

The gang watched. Anna with a cold grin, Peter with silent approval, Klos with guilty slur.

And Hannes swore to himself: Never again will I trust words. Those who lie pay. Those who cheat bleed.

It began with a throw that was too perfect. Two sixes, gleaming in the candlelight as if the devil himself had spat them onto the table. A murmur went through the group. One cursed. Another spat.

"The bastard has gambled!" yelled one, a guy with a scar running from his forehead to his chin. "No pig rolls dice like that!"

That was the spark.

Hannes jumped up, dice in hand, and slammed them in the man's face. "Look, you dog! Pure luck—and I'm purer than you'll ever be!"

The man laughed bitterly and pulled a knife from his boot. "Luck? No. Cheating." The air in the room tightened like a trap. Everyone knew what was coming next.

Hannes overturned the table. Cards flew like birds, coins clattered across the floor. Then a fist crashed. A punch, a scream. Chairs tipped over, men jumped

to their feet. Anna threw beer in a player's face, Klos swung his chain, Peter grabbed the first attacker by the throat and pushed him against the wall until the guy was gasping for breath.

The knife flashed. Hannes narrowly dodged, felt the blade pass his cheek, smelled the iron. He reached out, grabbed the arm, twisted, the joint cracked, the man roared. Then he slammed his head onto the table so hard that the wood splintered.

The dive was in a frenzy. Blows, screams, blood on the floor. Men fought without knowing why. Dice rolled between feet, cards stuck to puddles of beer. It was no longer a game; it was a battle.

Hannes stood in the middle, knife dripping, grinning broadly, gaping red teeth. "This is my game!" he yelled, as the man with the facial scar fell to the ground, gasping for breath. "And I always win!"

This was no longer a gaming table. It was a battlefield of wood, iron, and lies. And Hannes ruled over the rubble.

When the noise died down, the table was nothing but a pile of splinters. Coins were stuck in the beer, cards in blood. Men lay groaning in the straw, one with a broken arm, one missing a tooth, one motionless, perhaps dead.

And in the middle of this filth stood Hannes. Bloody, panting, his scar reopened, a knife in his fist. His coat was more red cloth than fur, his knuckles blue, but his grin was wide. The gap between his teeth sparkled like a crown.

Klos crouched next to him, his chain covered in blood, still laughing even though he could barely breathe. Anna collected coins from the floor as if she had caused the whole mess just for this reason. Peter stood there like a statue, a shadow who had forced more calm with his fists than any prayer.

The remaining players remained silent. Some wiped blood from their eyes, others pretended not to see. But there was something in their gaze that addicted Hannes: fear.

"I told you," he growled, his voice hoarse, "this is my game. I won't lose."

He stepped into the middle of the room, picked up a handful of coins, and held them up. "Your gold, your happiness, your lives—all belong to me. I'll take it if I want. And none of you can stop me."

No one objected. No one dared.

It wasn't a victory with trumpets, not a victory with songs. It was a victory in the dirt. Blood, beer, lies—and in the middle of it all, the bastard, the king of losers, the ruler of cards, dice, and fear.

And in the silence that came after the storm, Hannes knew: He hadn't just won coins. He had gained power. A power that was addictive.

The dive was a smoke-filled grave. Men lay in the filth, whores collected coins from puddles, and the barman desperately mopped blood that wouldn't go away. The stench of liquor, sweat, and iron hung heavy in the air.

Hannes sat on an overturned chair, legs spread, knife on the table, bag full. His knuckles burned, his scar throbbed, and yet he grinned. A grin louder than any song.

He had won. Not because the cards were on his side. Not because the dice fell correctly. But because he had been willing to shed blood where others only wanted to gamble.

But deep inside, something gnawed at him. He felt that cards and dice were like gods—they gave you everything, only to let you lose everything the next moment. Today he had won. Tomorrow he could be the one lying in the dirt.

Anna looked at him, her eyes sparkling. "You're playing with more than coins, Hannes." He grinned back. "Exactly. I'm playing with lives."

The gang remained silent, but everyone knew this wasn't an exaggeration. Every throw, every card, every promise – it was a step further into the abyss.

And as the bells of Mainz echoed dully through the smoke, Hannes thought: *This is my path. Win or lose. Blood or gold. And I'll take both.*

A promise—this time to himself. A promise he wouldn't break.

Bloody fingers in the bread basket

Coins clinked in his purse, liquor flowed in his mugs, whores giggled in the alleys—and yet it still gnawed at him. Hunger. That old, familiar beast in Hannes's stomach that wouldn't be appeased with gold or beer.

Bread. Just bread. Warm, crispy, heavy in the hand. No liquor, no meat, no sweet laughter could banish this hunger. Bread was power. Bread was life. And whoever had it could give orders.

The markets of Mainz were full of them. Rows of bread, large round loaves, baskets that smelled like heaven and torture at the same time. For the farmers, the traders, the fat citizens, it was everyday life. For Hannes, it was a promise—and an insult.

"We have coins," Anna murmured, her eyes sharp as daggers. "Why not buy them?" Hannes laughed, a short, harsh bark. "Buy them? I'm not buying anything. I'll take it."

His fingers twitched when he saw the baskets, the loaves stacked on top of each other. It was like back when he was just a boy, digging for crusts in the dirt. Only now he was no longer a dog. Now he was the bastard with a coat, a knife, and a gang.

Klos practically drooled at the sight. "Shit, I'd kill someone for a piece." "Then start," Hannes growled. "Because that's exactly what we do."

Hunger turned bread into gold. And every bite would be paid for in blood.

The Mainz market was crowded, vendors shouted, children shrieked, dogs chewed over bones. Noise and smells were everywhere—rotten apples, cheap fish, sweat, beer. And in the middle of it all, the bakery stand: baskets full of bread, still warm, the aroma like a whip to the stomach.

Hannes's eyes burned. Hunger gnawed at him, greed even more so. He saw the baker, a fat dog with red cheeks, boasting: "The best bread in Mainz! Only for honest money!" Hannes grinned crookedly. Honest. A word that meant nothing to him.

Without hesitation, he stepped forward, and the crowd reluctantly parted. The bastard in the coat, his scar like a warning sign. He reached into the basket and grabbed a loaf, still hot and steaming, the crust cracking in his hands.

The baker immediately yelled: "Hey, you dog! Pay up or get out!" The crowd laughed, roared, some nodded. One muttered: "Finally, the bastard gets what he deserves."

Hannes took a bite. A deep bite, the crust splintered, the crumb stuck to his teeth. He chewed slowly, looking the baker in the eyes, his grin full of scorn. "Tastes like victory," he murmured through his mouth full.

Then the baker grabbed him by the arm. Thick fingers, strong from kneading, digging into his skin like a vice. "That's stealing, bastard," he growled. "And thieves will be punished."

Hannes just grinned. He spat breadcrumbs onto the ground – and the first blood splattered. His knife flashed, tearing the skin between the baker's fingers. A scream, the crowd backed away, children shrieked.

"Whoever reaches into my bread basket," growled Hannes, "will see blood. Mine or his – I don't care."

His fingers were covered in crumbs and blood. The market was in a frenzy. And the bastard was laughing.

The fat baker's first cry was like a horn signal. From the backyards, from the stalls, from the stands, they emerged—journeymen, apprentices, men with arms like tree trunks and hands harder than any club. Not soldiers, not mercenaries—but bakers, damn it. Men who kneaded dough day after day until their muscles were like iron.

"Grab the bastard!" yelled the first, blood dripping from his hand, but his face red with rage.

And they came. Two rushed at Hannes, one brandishing a wooden bread peeler as if it were a spear. The blow slammed into his shoulder, he staggered, and the crust fell from his hand. The crowd cheered.

Klos leaped forward, brandishing his chain, and hit an apprentice in the ear, sending him screaming to the ground. Anna was faster, biting one of them in the wrist, drawing blood. Peter grabbed a journeyman and threw him over the market stall, sending bread flying.

But it was like a wave. Each baker who fell made way for the next. Strong arms, heavy blows. They didn't strike for coins, not for honor—they struck for bread.

Hannes laughed, even though his arm was burning. "Come on, you doughboys! Show me what you've got!" He swung, the knife flashing, cutting through the bread peeler, through flesh, through everything in his way. But someone grabbed him, yanking on his hand, the blade almost slipping. A punch slammed down on his fingers – bones cracked, blood spurted.

He screamed, a harsh, wild roar. His fingers immediately swelled, covered in crumbs and blood. But he didn't let go of the knife. Never.

The bakers raged, the crowd roared, children threw stones. And Hannes stood there, bloody, laughing, his fingers broken, but still clutching the bread.

Bloody fingers in the bread basket – and he swore no one would take them away from him.

The brawl spilled over from the market into the bakery's backyard. Sacks of flour were piled up there, the white powder already hanging in the air as if someone had dumped snow on the summer.

Hannes stumbled inside, his fingers throbbing, every bone screaming, but he grinned. The knife in his hand was bloody, the blade already half-sticking to his fingers. Klos staggered beside him, screaming, the chain whirling, while Anna pushed the first apprentice into the pile of flour. Peter smashed his way through, each fist a hammer.

The bakers followed, roaring and furious, and then everything crashed. Flour flew into the air, loaves rolled across the floor, blood spurted. One of the bakers swung a sack like a club, which burst, and a white cloud billowed out. Everyone coughed, stumbled, and could barely see.

And in this chaos, Hannes was in his element. He grabbed a journeyman, pressed his face into the flour until he gasped and choked, then pulled him up and laughed: "That's what bread tastes like, dog!" The white powder clung to the blood, transforming him into a grotesque image: a bastard with a white-and-red face, half clown, half demon.

The blows grew harder. One of the bakers slammed Hannes against the wall with full force, knocking the air out of his lungs. He stabbed back, the blade slicing through his apron and stomach. A scream rang out, blood mixed with the flour. It looked as if they were fighting in the snow, which was tinged with red.

Anna kicked one of them in the knee with full force, and he collapsed. Klos whirled, punched, hit, laughed hysterically. Peter was the tower, absorbing the bakers' force, pushing them back as if they were nothing.

When the cloud cleared, the ground was a living hell: bread trampled, flour like fog, trails of blood across the yard. And Hannes stood in the middle of it all, his fingers bloody, his knife dripping, grinning broadly.

"This is my breadbasket," he growled. "And anyone who touches it will pay with blood."

After the battle in the flour pile, the gang was broken, but not defeated. They dragged themselves into a side alley, bread under their arms, blood on their hands. It should have been a victory, a triumph over the bakers and their wrath. But hunger made their throats dry, their fingers greedy.

A boy had been there, a fellow runner, barely sixteen, whom Hannes had picked up at the market. One of those who had nothing but torn shoes and an empty stomach. He had run along, had grabbed at something, had snatched a loaf of bread as if it belonged to him.

But when the gang settled down, blood dripping and breathing heavy, the boy was gone. Gone. With the bread.

Anna noticed it first. "Where's the dog?" she hissed, her eyes narrowed. Klos laughed stupidly. "Maybe he's peeing." But Peter just looked into the darkness and growled, "He's running. With our bread."

And he was right. The very next day they heard. The boy was at the bakers', with a full stomach and a few coins in his pocket. He had told them where the gang was hiding. He had revealed everything – for a piece of bread.

Hannes' fingers twitched. His broken bones ached, every breath burned. But the pain was nothing compared to his anger.

"For a loaf of bread," he murmured, his voice hoarse. "The dog will betray us for a loaf of bread."

The gang remained silent. Everyone knew what that meant. Betrayal was not a joke, not a mistake. Betrayal was an illness. And Hannes swore: Illness will be eradicated.

"We'll get him," he growled, "and we'll show Mainz that no piece of bread in the world is enough to betray me."

They found the boy two nights later. At the edge of the market, full of food, crumbs still on his face, his pockets jingling with the coins he'd received from the bakers. He didn't see them coming. No traitor ever sees them coming.

Hannes grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into the darkness of an alley. The boy kicked, whined, and stammered: "I had to! I was hungry! They gave me money, bread—"

The words cut into Hannes's ear like blunt knives. Hunger? Money? Bread? All excuses. All rubbish.

"You sold us," Hannes growled, his voice deeper than the shadow around him. "For a loaf of bread. For crumbs."

The boy cried, fell to his knees, swore he would come back, swore he would make everything right. But Hannes didn't listen. He only saw the betrayal, only smelled the fear, only felt the knife in his hand.

Anna stood beside her, arms crossed, her eyes glowing coldly. "Show them," she whispered. Peter remained silent, but his gaze was heavy as iron. Even Klos was silent, the chain in his hand, but he didn't laugh.

Hannes grabbed the boy's hand and pressed it against an old wooden bread basket lying in the trash. "You wanted bread," he growled, "so now you're eating your blood."

Then came the knife. A cut, hard, deep. The boy screamed, his fingers splattered red, dripping onto the basket. Hannes held him tight, looked at him, grinning bloodily. "That's the price of betrayal. No bread in the world is as expensive as my anger."

They left the boy behind, whimpering, bleeding, writhing in the dirt. The next morning, the whole neighborhood was talking about the alley that had been littered with breadcrumbs and blood.

And everyone knew: whoever betrays the bastard will pay. Always.

The boy lay in the dirt, his fingers mutilated, his bread betrayed, his scream still echoing through the streets. Mainz was already talking about it that morning.

Some whispered, others spat on the ground, but the same tone rang out in all voices: fear.

Bread, the simplest of things, had become a symbol. No loaf, no basket, no crust was harmless anymore. Everyone now knew: wherever Hannes reached, blood flowed. Even with bread.

The gang was back in the barn on the outskirts of town, full of stolen flour, but quieter than usual. Klos chewed without laughing. Anna cut crusts into pieces as if they were enemies. Peter stared into the fire, his fists clenched.

Hannes held a loaf in his hand. His fingers throbbed, the skin covered in cracks and blood, yet he tore off pieces, chewed, and grinned. "This isn't bread anymore," he murmured. "This is war."

He sensed this was just a foretaste. Today it was a boy, a follower, betraying for Krümel. Tomorrow, men would follow, entire gangs, perhaps even friends. Bread was life, bread was power, and whoever fought for it did so with blood.

The bastard looked into the embers, felt the pain in his fingers, and laughed softly. "Let them come," he whispered. "I'll give them more blood than they have bread."

And deep in the night, he knew: From now on, every bite was an oath. And every oath a step closer to the gallows.

The smell of powder and cheap perfume

The dive was louder than usual. Not because of the dice or the whores, not because of the songs blaring through the smoke. But because of a sound Hannes hadn't heard before. A bang. Short, hard, like a clap of thunder in his stomach.

The men screamed, one laughed, another cursed. And there it lay: an old table, with a pistol on it, black, heavy, with the smell of sulfur still hanging in the air. Smoke curled through the dive, mingling with the smell of beer and sweat.

Hannes stepped closer. His heart beat faster, not out of fear, but out of greed. Knives, fists—that was his world. But this? This was thunder you could hold in your hand.

A mercenary, half-bald, his face covered in scars, picked up the pistol. "Fresh from France," he boasted, his voice raspy. "With something like that, I'll blow your heart out before you draw your knife." He grinned, showing black teeth, and placed the weapon back on the table.

Hannes stared. The smoke burned his nose, the explosion still vibrated in his bones. He saw more than just a weapon—he saw power. More than any fist, more than any blade.

Klos whispered reverently, "Shit... that makes you God." Anna grinned crookedly, her gaze flickering between the gun and Hannes. "Or the devil." Peter said nothing. But his eyes were fixed on the thing, as if he knew: The game had changed here.

And Hannes? Hannes laughed softly, his gaping teeth dark, his scar red in the light. "Powder," he murmured. "The smell of power."

At that moment, he knew: The bastard with the knife was just the beginning. With a bang like that, he could shock the world.

No sooner had the smoke from the pistol cleared than another stench crept through the dive. Sweet, sticky, heavy. Cheap perfume that didn't cover the walls, but clung like a second skin to the stench of beer, sweat, and sulfur.

The whores approached, like moths to a flame. Their faces painted, their lips red as fresh blood, their eyes smudged, their dresses cheap but low-cut enough to take the men's breath away. They laughed, they giggled, they sat on laps as if trying to drown out the gunshots with their sweet stench.

One of them sat down next to Hannes. Her dress smelled of old smoke, of strange men, of perfume that was more reminiscent of flower rot than roses. She leaned forward, her breath warm, her voice hoarse. "You look like someone who wants more."

Hannes grinned. "I want it all." She laughed, a dirty laugh that caught in her throat, and ran her fingers through his hair, which still smelled of smoke.

Anna watched from the sidelines, her eyes narrowed. Peter remained frozen, but even he inhaled the scent mingling with the sulfur. Klos staggered, understanding nothing except that the whore's hips were twisting his head in time with her laughter.

Powder and perfume. Two scents that couldn't be more opposite—death and lust, blood and skin. And yet they fit perfectly. They stuck together like dirt on a boot.

Hannes inhaled both, deeply, greedily. The smell of death in the air, the scent of woman's skin on his shoulder. And he knew: This was Mainz. No bread, no dice. But powder and perfume. Violence and desire.

And he grinned because he knew he belonged here.

The smoke still hung like a cloud over the table, the perfume clinging to his skin like a sticky film. And Hannes realized: This wasn't a coincidence. Powder and perfume belonged together. Two sides of the same damn coin.

One promised death. A bang, a hole, a body twitching. The other promised life—or at least what remained of it: warmth, skin, a rush in the dirt. Both equally wrong, equally sweet, equally addictive.

He inhaled it, deeply, greedily. The sulfur in his throat, the scent of the whore in his nose. It mingled into an intoxication stronger than liquor, harder than any victory with his fists.

Anna saw it, her lips tight. "You smell like someone who's selling themselves," she hissed. Hannes laughed. "Sold? I'll buy it all. With blood."

The men in the room grinned, some nodded. They understood what he meant. Here in Mainz, it wasn't about morality, not about law. This was about possessions. Whoever had the gunpowder had power. Whoever had the women had glory.

Klos giggled as a whore took the chain from his hand and placed it around her neck as if it were jewelry. Peter stood in the smoke, motionless, but his fists twitched, as if he knew this was more dangerous than any fight.

Powder and perfume. Violence and lust. Two intoxicants that had the same goal: to make you forget who you were—and transform you into what you wanted to be.

And Hannes? He inhaled the mixture as if he'd always needed it. For the first time, the bastard smelled like a king. A king of smoke and skin.

The mercenary placed it on the table as if it were nothing special. A piece of iron, black, heavy, with a barrel that stared out at the world like an open mouth. But the smell still hung in the air: sulfur, smoke, burnt flesh from someone who had just stood too close.

"Come on, bastard," growled the mercenary, his voice like a rusty hinge. "Go for her if you've got the balls."

Hannes reached out. No hesitation, no trembling. He closed his fingers around the handle – cold, heavy, strange. It wasn't like a knife that lay easily in the fist, not like a chain that could be swung. No, this was different. A damned world in his hand.

He raised it and aimed roughly into the room. A few men immediately ducked, laughing nervously, one shouted, "Watch out! That bastard's about to blow the ceiling away!"

But Hannes just grinned. The scar gleamed, the gap between his teeth dark, his eyes full of greed. This weight, this promise in the iron—that wasn't a weapon, that was a throne.

"A knife has to go in," he murmured quietly, more to himself. "But this... this is coming from afar. One finger, and you're God."

Anna stared at him, her lips pressed into thin lines. She knew something was changing. Klos stood beside him, his mouth open, as if he'd seen heaven. Peter took a step closer, placed a heavy, warning hand on Hannes's shoulder. "That thing doesn't make you invincible," he said quietly.

"Yes," growled Hannes, still holding the gun, "it makes me immortal."

The mercenary took it back, mockingly, as if he'd taken a child's toy. "Too expensive for bastards like you."

Hannes' grin remained. "Not yet," he murmured. "Not yet."

And in that moment, he knew: sooner or later, he would have one of his own. No knife, no dice, no scream could stop that.

The pistol had barely disappeared from the table when the next storm broke out – and it smelled not of gunpowder, but of cheap perfume.

A young whore, painted, her lips red as fresh meat, sat on Hannes' lap, giggling, stroking his hair. The scent of old smoke and rosewater hung about her, sweet and lazy at the same time. Hannes grinned, playfully bit her ear, and she laughed as if he were already her new master.

But then another man appeared. A mercenary, still half-drunk, his face covered in scars, his hand heavy with rings. "She's mine," he growled, and grabbed the woman by the arm.

She shrieked, more out of habit than fear, and immediately the air shifted. Hannes' grin froze, his gaze darkened. The mercenary leaned over him, his breath stank of liquor. "Get her down, bastard. Or I'll break your face."

The gang tensed. Anna immediately stood up, her eyes flashing. Klos twirled the chain, slurring: "Touch him and I'll knock your teeth out!" Peter remained silent, but took a step forward, his fists like stones.

Hannes slowly stood up, the woman slid off his lap, and ducked away. He looked the mercenary straight in the face. No fists, no knives this time—just his will. "If you want something," he growled, "take it."

The first blow came from the mercenary, hard, a punch like a hammer. Hannes staggered, blood spurted from his lip—and he laughed. That crazy, hollow laugh that froze everyone in the room. Then he rammed his knee into his groin, grabbed him by the neck, and slammed his skull onto the table, knocking the candle over.

The whore screamed, the smoke mingling with the stench of perfume. The mercenary roared, drew a knife—and at that moment, one of the other men reached for his pistol.

Powder. Perfume. Blood. All in one breath.

Hannes grinned, blood in his mouth, and yelled, "Then let's dance!"

The mercenary with the knife brandished wildly, blood dripping from his nose, his eyes filled with hatred. Next to him, another raised his pistol, the iron

gleaming in the light of the overturned candle, smoke already hanging heavy in the air.

For a heartbeat, the dive was silent. Only the panting of men, the giggling of a whore too drunk to sense danger, and the creaking of the floorboards.

Then Hannes grabbed. Lightning fast, decisive. He grabbed the pistol, ripped it from the man's hand, and suddenly he was the one holding the thunderbolt. The weight was there again, cold, deadly—but this time it was his.

He raised it, the muzzle pointed directly at the mercenary's face. The man froze, the knife trembling in his fist. Hannes grinned, his lip split, blood between his teeth. "Come on," he hissed. "Say again it's yours."

Silence. No one moved. Even Klos held the chain still. Anna stood with her arms crossed, Peter like a shadow behind him.

Hannes didn't pull the trigger. Not yet. But he stepped closer, the iron so close that the mercenary could smell the sulfur. "See it?" he yelled to the crowd. "Fists, knives—all just child's play. With this thing, you rule!"

A few nodded, others lowered their eyes. No one laughed anymore.

Then he struck—not with a bullet, but with a steel blade. He rammed the pistol across the mercenary's face, bones cracked, the man fell to the ground, the knife clattering away.

Hannes spat on him, raising the pistol as if it were a crown. "This is my sign," he growled. "Anyone who challenges me will eat lead—or my wrath."

The bar didn't rage, it remained silent. And that was precisely his victory.

The gun lay back on the table, heavy, black, silent. But its bang still echoed in the minds of everyone in the room. And in Hannes's chest, it pounded like a heart that refused to be silent.

The smell of sulfur still hung in the air, mixed with the sweet, putrid perfume of whores. It was a mixture you could never get rid of once you'd swallowed it. Violence and lust, death and skin—the two smells that would accompany your life from now on.

Anna looked at him, suspicious, but also with a twinkle in her eyes, as if she knew Hannes was headed for something greater. Klos staggered around

laughing, the chain around a prostitute's neck as if he were a king. Peter stood silently in the shadows, but the silence was tightened in his fists like a rope: He knew Pulver would change everything.

Hannes picked up the gun again briefly, weighed it, and grinned. "Soon," he murmured. "Soon I'll own one of these things. And then it won't just be Mainz that belongs to me."

The words were not a boast, but a promise – to himself, to his gang, to anyone who would hear it.

Gunpowder was the future. Knives were the past. And between the two lay he, the bastard with the scar, craving more than his belly could ever contain.

And outside in the fog of Mainz the night already smelled of blood and smoke.

Friends like rusty nails

The night after Mainz had spat them out like rats too stuffed to bite. They crouched in an abandoned stable on the outskirts of the city, between straw that smelled of urine and beams that might collapse at any moment. No palace, no hiding place—just a hole, just good enough for bastards.

Klos lay on his back, the chain still around his neck, babbling a song even he didn't understand. Anna sat with her back against the wall, chewing on a piece of bread that had long since gone hard, but her eyes were alert, always alert. Peter stood in the doorway, like a statue, his fists at his sides, as if he were guarding the world even in his sleep.

And Hannes? Hannes lay between them, his coat beneath him, his knife beside him, staring into the darkness. His head was full of smoke, full of liquor, full of faces he'd seen the night before. But in this chaos, he wasn't thinking about loot or blood. He was thinking about her. His gang.

No friends in the traditional sense. No brothers who would die for him, no family that had ever held him. No—they were like nails. Rusty, crooked, and askew. Nails that held something together, as long as they weren't put under too much strain. But every nail rusts. Every nail breaks.

He heard Klos giggling, Anna cursing, Peter breathing. And he knew: without them, he would be nothing. With them, he was something. Not a king, not a ruler—but a fist, a shadow, a name.

And as the mice scurried through the straw and the bells of Mainz tolled dully outside, Hannes thought: *Friends? No. Dogs. Nails. Dirt. But they're my dirt. And as long as they last, I'll last too.*

Anna was still sitting in the shadows, bread in hand, her eyes fixed on Hannes. She wasn't really chewing—she was biting, slowly, as if each bite were a judgment.

"You have a problem, Hannes," she finally said, her voice rough with smoke. He grinned crookedly. "Just one?" "You think you're king. But you're just a bastard with a knife. A king buys women, you take them. A king has soldiers, you have drunkards. A king has crowns, you only have scars."

Her words cut harder than any knife. But Hannes laughed. "And yet you follow me." Anna leaned back, her eyes sparkling in the darkness. "Because you're crazy. And crazy people die quickly. But until then... it's damn entertaining."

Klos giggled in his sleep, as if he'd heard something, and turned around. Peter remained silent at the entrance, but his shadow loomed over the two of them, like a silent sentinel.

"You see through me," Hannes murmured, "and yet you stay." "Maybe," she hissed, "because I know you're the only one who dreams big enough to blow all this up."

For a moment there was silence. No mockery, no laughter. Just her eyes, cold and close. Then Hannes grinned, broad, bloody, the gap in his teeth dark. "Then we'll keep dreaming, Anna. And if we fall, then we'll fall with a bang."

She laughed, short, harsh, without warmth. And Hannes knew: Anna was not a friend, not a lover, not a sister. She was a rusty nail, crooked, sharp, dangerous—but one who still held everything together.

Klos lay in the straw, the chain still around his neck like a ridiculous piece of jewelry, and snored. Occasionally he mumbled, laughing in his sleep as if he always won in his dreams. He smelled of liquor, sweat, and old blood—a walking dive, even in his sleep.

For Hannes, Klos was like a rusty nail that wobbled and creaked, yet somehow held. Loyal as a dog, but a dog that slobbered more than it bit. One that would follow you blindly, even into the fire, as long as you first gave him a pitcher.

Sometimes Hannes hated him for it. For his stupidity, for his slurring, for the way he always got too excited when the blood flowed. But sometimes that was precisely what made him so valuable. Klos didn't think. He acted. A punch, a jump, a laugh—he was chaos, and chaos was useful.

Anna despised him. "A dog who bites because he thinks it's love," she once mocked. Peter said nothing, but when he looked at Klos, there was this twinkle—as if he knew that the staggering dog would one day become a problem.

And Hannes? He grinned. Klos was a fool, a drunk, a dog on guard who made more noise than he did damage. But he *was* a fool. His dog. And as long as Klos laughed, as long as he swung his chain, as long as he snored in the dirt next to him, Hannes wasn't alone.

He looked at the guy grinning into the straw and thought: *If it rusts, it rusts for me. And that's enough.*

Peter was still standing at the entrance, motionless, his shoulders as broad as a barn door. His fists were loose but heavy, as if iron weights hung from each finger. His face was a wall—hard, still, without cracks.

He rarely spoke. Sometimes he wouldn't speak a word for entire days. But when he did speak, it was like a blow: short, brutal, impossible to ignore. To Hannes, he wasn't a dog like Klos, nor a dagger like Anna – he was a tower. A rusty, old tower, perhaps, but one that still held, even though the rain had been pouring down on it for years.

The gang knew that without Peter, they would have perished long ago. He was the weight that held them down when Hannes' megalomania drove them skyward. Someone who didn't laugh in the noise of the dives, but hit. Someone who didn't topple over in the chaos, but stayed standing.

Hannes often looked at him and wondered: Why is he following me? No greed in his eyes, no laughter, no sparkle. Only this quiet rage that drove him on, as if he were born of the same filth as himself.

Anna once said, "Peter doesn't talk because words have disappointed him." Klos slurred, "He doesn't talk because he has no throat!"—and received a fist that almost pushed him into the straw.

Hannes grinned. Peter wasn't a friend in the warm sense. He was a nail, rusty, hard, crooked, but one who held the planks together. Without him, the gang would be nothing more than loose boards in a storm.

And deep down, Hannes knew: If everyone else fell, Peter would still be standing. Until he, too, rusted and broke. But until then, he was the tower. His tower.

Night crept deeper into the stable, and the schnapps crept deeper into the gang. Klos was long awake again, staggering through the straw, his chain rattling, his laughter loud. Anna drank straight from the bottle, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, her eyes gleaming feverishly. Peter barely took a sip, but even he didn't completely put the cup down.

Hannes raised his mug, half empty, half full of blood from the last fight. "To us," he growled. "To the dogs who don't want to die."

"To us!" roared Klos, almost falling over, hitting his head on the beam, laughing as if it were a joke. "To the bastard," said Anna dryly, and drank so deeply she gasped. Peter raised his cup briefly, without a word. But that was enough.

They clinked glasses. Heavy, clinking, as if their cups were pieces of iron rather than clay jugs. A small vow, born of drunkenness, nailed to the metal with liquor and fatigue: that they wouldn't abandon each other, that they would stay together until the gallows came—or longer.

But everyone knew it. Vows sworn while drunk are like boards in the rain. They swell, they crack, they break as soon as the next storm comes.

But for that moment, amidst the straw, the stench, and the darkness, they held on. They laughed, they drank, they roared, and for a moment, their bond was more than hunger, more than violence. They were nails, rusty, crooked—and yet they held together.

Hannes grinned, his gaping teeth dark. "If we fall," he murmured, "we'll fall together."

And the gang toasted as if they believed it.

The drunkenness had barely worn off when the test came. There was no need for a traitor from outside, no baker with fists – sometimes a piece of bread is enough.

Klos had put a loaf aside in the dark. A loaf of bread, half-crushed, but genuine, still from the market. When Hannes woke up in the morning, he saw the crumbs in Klos's beard, the sack under the straw.

"What do you have there?" he asked, his voice rough and threatening. Klos stammered, laughed, and raised his hands defensively. "Nothing, bastard. Just a piece for me. I swear." Anna immediately jumped up, grabbed him by the ear, and dragged him into the light. "For you? Everything we get is for us. There's *no* for me. You dog."

Klos whined and squirmed, but there was Peter. He stepped forward, his fist like a judgment. "He betrayed us. First a loaf of bread, then more."

Hannes remained silent. He looked at Klos, the staggering dog, loyal but weak. A rusty nail that was already creaking. And he knew: If he broke it now, the bond would be smaller—but stronger. If he let him, he risked others following suit.

Klos knelt, tears streaming down his face, crumbs on his lips. "I just wanted... I was hungry. Just hungry."

Hannes stepped forward, grabbed him by the hair, and pulled him up. His fingers trembled, his fist twitched. Then he let go. "We're all hungry. But betray me again, Klos—and you won't eat another crust."

Anna hissed, Peter nodded, Klos howled and swore everything a dog could swear.

And Hannes thought: A nail can rust, become crooked, almost break. But as long as it's still holding, you won't knock it out. Not yet.

The gang was asleep again, spread out in the dirt like dogs after a hunt. Klos snored, Anna stared into the darkness, Peter stood in the doorway, motionless as a tree trunk in a storm.

But Hannes stayed awake. He lay in the straw, his cloak over his shoulders, his knife in his hand, and heard the creaking of the beams, the whistling of the wind through the cracks. And he thought of nails.

Friends like rusty nails – that was all he had. Crooked, blunt, half-rotted. But they held him together. For now. And he knew: One day, one of them would break. One wouldn't survive the hammer, one would jump out of the woodwork.

Anna was too smart, too cold, to stay forever. Klos was too stupid, too greedy, not to betray her at some point. Peter was too silent, too heavy, not to collapse at some point.

But as long as they held, he was more than just a bastard. As long as they held, he was Schinderhannes.

He turned the knife in his hand, the glow of the embers flashing on the blade. "As long as they rust," he murmured, "they rust for me."

Dogs barked outside, and the night smelled of rain and iron. Hannes knew it wouldn't last forever. But for the moment, it did. And that was enough.

Betrayal for a bowl of soup

The dives of Mainz had a lot to offer: schnapps, women, knives in the back. But on this evening, it wasn't the intoxication, not the meat, not the blood that the gang craved. It was soup. A miserable broth, so thin you could see the bottom of the bowl through it. But it was hot. It smelled of bones, of salt, of life.

Hannes stared into the steaming kettles behind the counter. A few old women were scooping from them, their arms sinewy, their faces wrinkled like old leather. Everyone only got a spoonful if they could pay. Those who didn't pay got nothing—except ridicule.

Klos almost drooled when he caught the smell. "Shit," he muttered, "I'd give anything for a bowl of that." Anna laughed dryly. "Everything? You don't have anything." Peter remained silent, but his gaze was glued to the steaming broth, so fixed that you sensed he wanted it, too.

And Hannes? He grinned. Bitterly, full of teeth and hungry. He'd already drunk blood, swilled liquor, and torn flesh – but now he felt: Nothing was more valuable than a bowl of soup when your stomach was growling like a dog.

He saw the other figures in the tavern. Poor wretches, beggars, half-children whimpering for a few drops of soup, their hands begging, their faces sunken. He laughed at them, but deep down he knew: He wasn't a step better. Only dirtier, only louder.

A bowl of soup. Warm, greasy, and miserable. And yet, tonight it was golden.

The tavern was full of empty stomachs. Men with sunken cheeks, women with children so thin they looked like baby birds. Everyone crowded around the kettle, holding out their hands, begging for a cup.

"Please, just a spoonful, Mistress... I'll pay you back..." "My child, it's dying, give us something..." "Just a crust, just a scrap..."

Voices scratched at the walls like rats. Hannes laughed first, spat on the floor, and grinned with his bloody gap-toothed grin. "Look at them," he cried. "Dogs whining. For broth that tastes like shoe soles."

But then his own stomach growled, loudly, painfully, like an animal about to burst out. Anna gave him a look, sharp as a knife. "And what are you, Hannes? Do you think you're better? Your stomach screams louder than hers."

Klos was already pushing forward, trying to push an old woman aside. She hit him with the ladle, the grease splattered on his shirt, and he yelled as if he'd won. Peter remained silent, but his eyes were dark, hard—hunger softens even stone.

Hannes saw the bowl before him. Thin broth, a piece of turnip, a scrap of meat that barely deserved the name. But in that moment, it was no longer mockery. It was life.

And he realized: hunger eats pride faster than any blade.

His name was Jakob. A skinny, cold-faced creature of perhaps eighteen, who had joined the gang because he believed Hannes would provide bread and courage in abundance. Instead, he found blood, fear—and empty stomachs.

Jacob was weak. Not a fighter, not a robber, more like a shadow, trailing behind them and living on scraps. Hannes had tolerated him because an extra dog in the pack was sometimes useful. But hunger makes dogs vicious.

That evening, Jakob couldn't hold out any longer. His stomach growled so loudly that even Klos laughed at him. Anna spat at his feet. "Eat the stones,

boy, that's all you'll get." Peter remained silent, but his look said it all: he's about to break.

And he broke.

Hannes saw it when the landlady suddenly winked at him, when a guy in the corner grinned too long. Words had flowed. Words about the gang, about their hiding place, about the bastard with the scar. Jacob had talked. For what? For a bowl of soup.

When they found him later, he was crouching in the dark, the bowl in his hands, his face greasy with broth. He devoured it greedily, as if it were gold. His eyes shone, not with remorse, but with satiety.

Hannes stepped closer, his scar dark, his grin cold. "Was it worth it, boy?" he asked.

Jacob trembled, gripping the bowl tighter as if it were a shield. "I... I had to. I would have died otherwise."

And in that moment, Hannes knew: soup was stronger than vows. Hunger broke all loyalty.

It took less than an hour for the trap to snap shut. Hannes sensed it before it happened—the stares, the silence, the whispering at the bar. Mainz was full of eyes, and now they were all directed at him.

The gang had barely retreated when they heard boots. Lots of them. Not the staggering stomping of drunken peasants, but hard footsteps, steady, heavy. City guards. Armed, with spears and clubs.

"Damn it," Anna growled, "that little guy was talking." Klos cursed and pulled the chain out of his shirt. "I'll rip his head off!" Peter said nothing, but he clenched his fists and took a step forward, as if he could hold the entire city back with his hands.

And Hannes? Hannes laughed. That harsh, wooden laugh that only came when the ground beneath him was burning. "A bowl of soup," he muttered. "They're selling us for so little."

Then the doors crashed. The guards rushed in, the torchlight blinding, spears flashing. One shouted, "There they are!" – and suddenly the room was filled with iron and violence.

The gang struck back. Klos spun the chain, hitting one of them in the temple. Anna raised a jug and smashed it into a guard's face, spurting blood. Peter thundered through the ranks like a battering ram, sending them crashing to the ground one by one.

But there were too many. Too many spears, too many fists, too much order against their wild filth.

And in the chaos, amidst the screams, blood, and smoke, Hannes saw Jakob once more. The bowl in his hands, his lips glistening with grease. He ducked away while the guards struck.

Hannes' fingers twitched around the knife. He swore: betrayal would not go unpunished. Not for gold, not for women—and certainly not for a bowl of soup.

The fight was over before it had really begun. The guards hadn't caught them—the gang had fought back too wildly, too hard. But they had injured them, scattered them, scarred them. Blood dripped, bones ached, and breathing was labored.

They were back in the stable on the outskirts of town. The stench of soup still hung in Hannes's nostrils, even though he hadn't tasted a drop himself. And the question gnawed at his mind: Which was stronger—hunger or loyalty?

Klos lay in the straw, moaning because a spear had grazed his ribs. Anna cursed as she licked the blood from her arm. Peter remained silent, as always, but his gaze burned, as if he wanted to ask Hannes himself: *What are we actually building on here?*

And Jacob? Jacob was missing. He had had his bowl, his warm bowl, and for that he had betrayed the bastard.

Hannes clenched his fist. He knew that loyalty in this world was thinner than soup. Every oath, every promise, every "forever" was only as strong as the hunger was weak. And hunger breaks everyone.

"Friendship?" he laughed hoarsely, spitting into the fire. "Screw it. You stay as long as you're full. That's the truth."

Anna looked at him sharply. "And you, Hannes? Will you stay with us if you're hungry?" He grinned, his teeth bleeding. "I'll stay until hunger consumes me. Then I'll eat you."

Klos laughed like a madman, Peter remained silent, Anna narrowed her eyes. But no one contradicted him. They knew he was right.

Hunger was stronger than loyalty. Always.

They found Jacob three nights later. He was crouching behind a bakery, the empty bowl still clutched in his hands as if it were his last treasure. Grease stains on his face, but his eyes hollow, like someone who is full and yet lost.

Hannes stepped out of the shadows. Not a word, not a sneer. Just the scar gleaming in the moonlight and the knife clutched in his fist. Anna beside him, cold as stone. Peter at his back, silent as the grave. Klos staggered, drunk but grinning—he knew what was coming.

Jakob saw her and tried to get up. "Hannes... I had to... it was just soup... otherwise I would have—" "Shut up," Hannes growled. "You sold us out. For broth that tastes like shoe soles."

Jacob fell to his knees, the bowl clattering in the dirt. "Please... I'll come back... I swear... I—"

Hannes grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. "You swear? Words are soup. Thin, hot, and cold tomorrow."

Then came the punishment. No quick cut, no quick death. Hannes ripped up the bowl, pressed Jakob's face into it, and kicked him to the ground. The boy whimpered and kicked, blood and dirt mingling with the remains of the broth.

"This is how he dies whoever betrays us," Hannes growled as he drove the knife slowly and deeply into the boy's side. Jacob wheezed, his hands shaking until they went limp.

When he lay still, the bowl was broken, the soup spilled, the blood steamed in the moonlight.

Hannes stood over him, grinning. "A bowl of soup... and you pay with your life. A cheap trade."

The gang was silent. No one laughed. But everyone understood.

The boy lay in the dirt, the bowl broken, the broth long since seeped into the ground. Only the blood remained, dark and sticky, like a new recipe Mainz wouldn't soon forget.

The gang stood in a circle. Klos squinted as if he were about to vomit. Anna chewed her lip, her eyes cold but watchful. Peter gazed silently at the dead man, as if checking if the corpse was still breathing.

Hannes smelled the scent—not of soup, not of blood, but of betrayal. It was a sweet, rotten stench that kept coming back. And he knew it wouldn't be the last time.

"Soup today," he muttered, wiping the knife on his coat. "Tomorrow maybe some coins. Or a woman. Or just a shitty look."

Anna nodded slowly. "Betrayal is always hungry. It eats its way through everything." Hannes grinned crookedly, his gap dark. "Then it'll eat its teeth out on me."

He spat on the ground and stepped back from the corpse. The wind blew through the alley, dogs barked in the distance. And the certainty grew in his gut: betrayal was not the exception, but the law. Everyone had their price.

And his name, Schinderhannes, would only grow the harder he worked to collect the price.

The laughter of the gallows birds

Mainz's market square stank of fish, horse manure, and cheap beer. But another smell hung over it all: iron, sweat, and cold wood. The gallows stood in the center, black and gnarled, as if it had been hewn from the city's ribs.

Hannes stopped, knife at his belt, coat half-open, grinning bloody. His gang staggered behind him, still drunk from the liquor and the fight. Klos laughed when he saw the thing, pointing at it with his chain as if it were a toy. "I'll never hang there, bastard, you hear? Never!"

But the gallows wasn't a threat. It was a habit. People walked past it like a well. Some spat, others made jokes, children threw stones at the wood, as if they were practicing for the day when someone would fidget again.

Anna stared up for a long moment, her arms crossed, her eyes dark. "They all end up here," she murmured. "Sooner or later." Peter remained silent, but his fists clenched as if he had already felt the rope on his neck.

Hannes laughed, sharply, briefly, as if he wanted to mock the square itself. "A gallows?" he growled. "Screw the gallows. If they want to hang me, they'll have to catch me first."

Above them, crows screeched, fat and black, their wings shining. They sat on the crossbeam, pecking at old ropes, laughing like little devils.

And Hannes sensed it: The birds were waiting. Not today, not tomorrow – but they were waiting.

The crowd gathered around the gallows, not because someone was hanging, but because there were always stories to tell. The gallows was theater, and everyone was their own poet.

"Do you remember the last one?" laughed an old man, his teeth black, his breath smelling of garlic. "He was thrashing around like a rooster with half his head cut off!" The crowd laughed, roared, and spat beer on the ground.

A woman with a crooked hat recounted how one man, as he was dying, screamed that he was innocent. "Innocent!" She snorted as if it were the biggest joke. "He who hangs was worth it." Children giggled, threw stones at the beam, shouted "Hangman! Hangman!" and mimed the wriggling until their mothers pulled them away.

Hannes and his gang stood in the middle of it all, heard it, smelled the sweat, the beer, the laughter. It wasn't gruesome—it was everyday. The gallows were no longer a source of terror, but a source of popular entertainment.

Klos roared along, slapping his thighs. "Cool! If I ever get caught, I'll laugh at all of you!" Anna snorted. "You'll laugh until your tongue falls out." Peter remained silent, his eyes fixed on the rope.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned. But it wasn't a warm grin. It was cold, full of teeth. He heard the laughter and knew: It wasn't just for the dead. It was for everyone who lived like him.

The people laughed at the hanged men – but in the same breath they laughed at him.

The longer Hannes stood in the square, the harder it became to laugh. It was no longer the roar of the crowd, no longer the farmers' stupid jokes. It was a scratching sensation, deep in the back of his neck, as if someone invisible were already putting the rope around his neck.

He heard it everywhere. In every burp, in every giggling child, in every mocking comment, it sounded like a promise: *You too, bastard. You too will soon be hanging here.*

The crows above him screamed, fluttered, and then perched again. Their cawing was like a laughter older than Mainz, older than all the markets, older than himself. They weren't laughing at the dead. They were laughing at the living, who thought they could escape the noose.

Anna felt it too. "Do you hear it?" she hissed, her eyes cold. "That's our song. The laughter of the birds. And they're already laughing at us." Klos laughed even louder, swayed, and pointed the chain upward. "Let them laugh! I'll laugh back!" But his voice trembled, and everyone heard it. Peter stood still, but his breathing was heavier, deeper. He knew what it meant when the gallows looked at you.

And Hannes? He grinned defiantly, but sweat crept down his back. The laughter was like a constant breath on his neck, hot and cold at the same time.

He clenched his fists, spat on the ground, and muttered, "Laugh, you birds. I'll laugh last."

But deep down he knew: Maybe that was the biggest lie of his life.

He stood at the edge of the square. Old, thin, an executioner or someone who liked to pretend. His face was sunken, his eyes yellow, his hands bony like branches. He leaned against the gallows beam as if it were his best friend.

Hannes immediately sensed that the guy smelled of rope and cold earth. Not of liquor, not of sweat—of death.

"Well, bastard," he croaked, his voice brittle like old wood. "Nice place, isn't it? They all end up here. Big names, small dogs. No one escapes." Hannes grinned broadly, his gaping teeth black. "I'm escaping. I'm not going out with a rope around my neck, old man." The old man laughed, dry, like bones knocking together. "That's what they all talk about. Until they end up here. Then they cry, spit, and scream. In the end, only the gallows laughs."

Anna crossed her arms, eyeing the old man like a carrion that already stinks before it's dead. Klos stepped back, his laughter stuck in his throat. Peter stepped closer, his fists clenched, as if he wanted to crush the skeleton into dust with one blow.

But the old man wasn't impressed. "I can already see you hanging, Hannes. Your legs are flailing, your tongue is blue. And the birds... oh, the birds will eat your eyes before the liquor evaporates from your corpse."

For a moment, it was silent. Even the crowd seemed to be listening.

Hannes stepped forward, so close he could smell the old man's foul breath. "When I hang, dude, I laugh. Louder than your fucking birds."

The old man grinned. "Then we'll just laugh together."

As they left the gallows ground, the laughter of the crows still hung in the air. But this time it wasn't just outside. It was in their throats, in their words, in the way they looked at each other.

Klos started, of course. He staggered, the chain rattled, and he yelled: "Imagine that bastard on the rope! Hah! Wriggling like a fish, and the people below are screaming: 'Schinderhannes, the king of the gallows!'" He practically rolled in the dust, laughing until tears streamed.

Anna laughed too, but coldly, sharply. "Oh, and you, Klos? You'd be the first to cry if they threw the noose over your head. You'd puke before you even dangled." "Shit!" Klos roared, wiping his eyes. "I'd dance!"

Even Peter, the mute, let out a dry, deep growl—something between a cough and a laugh. It was the first sound he'd heard in hours.

And Hannes? He laughed too. Short, hard, rusty. But his expression remained dark. It wasn't cheerful laughter, no warm bond between them. It was the laughter of those who know they've long since been summoned from the gallows—and who are just making fun of it because shouting doesn't help.

They laughed at themselves, at death, at the ropes that were already waiting for them.

But when the laughter died down, the silence grew even louder. Everyone knew how close the noose was.

They were sitting in a tavern that still smelled of the gallows ground, of beer, smoke, and the breath of those who had just told stories about the last hanged man. The gang had become quieter, but not Hannes.

He stood up, swaying, jug in hand, and stood in the middle of the room. "You're laughing at me," he growled. "At us. At every bastard still alive. And you think we'll soon be hanging out there."

A few heads lifted, curious, some amused.

Hannes raised the jug, his eyes black, his voice loud. "Screw your rope! Screw your crows! If they want to catch me, they'll have to tie me with ten ropes. And even then, I'll still bite their fingers off."

Laughter. First mocking, then louder, then roaring. Some laughed at him, some with him. Klos slammed his fist on the table and roared, "That's the talk of a king!" Anna shook her head, but a grin twitched at her lips. Peter just nodded, firmly, in agreement.

Hannes drained the mug, the beer flowing down his chin, and he shouted: "I'll laugh in the face of the rope! If they hang me, I'll dance! And if I die, then I'll die as a bastard, laughing while the birds eat!"

The crowd went wild, not out of respect, but out of a hunger for entertainment. But Hannes felt like a crowning moment. For a moment, he was taller than the gallows. For a moment, he was immortal.

And in that moment he felt: The rope was near – but he would defy it, until his last breath.

The tavern emptied, but outside you could still hear them: the crows. They screeched in the darkness, fluttering over the rooftops as if they continued to laugh, even though the square had long since fallen silent.

Hannes stepped out, his coat heavy with smoke, his knife cold at his side. The gang behind him—Klos staggering, Anna with sparkling eyes, Peter like a tower. They said nothing. The birds' laughter spoke for everyone.

He looked toward the gallows, black against the sky. No body hung from it, and yet he swore he saw the ropes dangling, heard the creaking, as if the beam were already impatient.

"They're waiting," Anna murmured. "Let them," Hannes growled, his grin wide, his gap-toothed dark. "I'll make them wait a long time. And when I'm stuck, I'll laugh louder than their damned birds."

But deep down, he knew: the gallows were already waiting for him. Every step he took led him closer to it. Every robbery, every murder, every laugh was a step onto the boards.

And the birds? They'd known it for a long time. They laughed, not because he had fallen, but because they knew he would.

Hannes spat in the dust, clenched his fist, and moved on. But the laughter stuck around his neck, like an invisible rope.

When children throw stones

The alley was narrow, damp, and littered with garbage. Rats scurried across the pavement, and somewhere water dripped from a broken roof. But in between – children. They played, laughed, and chased each other with sticks as if they were swords. Their voices screamed louder than the city bells.

Hannes' gang stomped through the middle. Ragged, bloody, their coats torn, their faces like stone. They smelled of liquor, smoke, and blood—foreign bodies in an alley full of tiny lives.

The children paused. Some stared wide-eyed, others giggled. One, barely older than ten, whispered, "That's him. The bastard." And immediately, it was as if he had lit a fire.

The little ones huddled together, sometimes curious, sometimes mocking. No one ran away. Not like the adults, who whispered or crossed the street. The children stayed. Their faces showed no fear—only that childlike courage that was so often more dangerous than knives.

Anna hissed, "Let's go on. They're filth." Klos grinned, jiggling the chain. "Ha! Maybe they want to play." Peter remained silent, but his gaze was hard.

And Hannes? He saw the children looking at him, their eyes shining. No respect, no wonder—just that raw, cheeky laughter. And he sensed: This wasn't going to be an easy passage.

It started harmlessly enough. A small pebble hit Klos on the shoulder. He laughed at first, thinking it was a coincidence, until a second one came—this

time directly against his forehead. "Ow, damned brats!" he yelled, stumbling forward.

The children giggled. One bent down, grabbed a paving stone so large he could barely lift it, and threw it in a high arc. It crashed into the straw next to Hannes's foot.

"They're throwing!" Anna cried, her voice sharp, her eyes glowing. Peter stood still, but his jaw clenched. He could have hurled any of those stones back with his bare hands—but he didn't move.

Then came the next one, and the next. Small fists, small arms, but the rage was fierce. Soon it rained stones. First gravel, then real chunks that slapped against the walls, bounced off their backs, and splashed into the dirt.

Klos cursed and wanted to rush forward and grab the children, but Hannes held him back. The scar on his cheek burned as a stone grazed him. He clenched his fists and watched the little ones laugh—laughing as they hit him.

It was no longer a game. It was war in miniature. And the knife in his hand trembled with rage.

The stones hit—hard, painful, sharp. One cut Hannes's lip, blood dripping into his beard. Another slammed into Peter's chest, causing him to recoil briefly. Anna ducked, cursed, and Klos squealed like a beaten dog.

And the children? They laughed.

No trembling, no running away, no fear. They stood there, with red faces and dirty hands, their eyes bright with rage and fun. Every time a stone hit, they roared louder, shrieking with joy as if they had just performed a play.

"Bastard!" cried one, barely eight years old. "Hangdog!" screamed another. And they all joined in this mocking, sharp laughter.

For Hannes, it was worse than any bullet. Men who hated him – that was normal. Women who cursed him – that was everyday life. But children who laughed at him while throwing things at him? That ate deeper into him than any blade.

Anna growled and spat in their direction. "Shitty brood. They're laughing because they don't yet know what it's like to eat blood." Klos raged, tried to rush forward, but stumbled in the dirt. The laughter only grew louder. Even

Peter, the tower, looked down briefly, as if he didn't want to show that it had affected him.

And Hannes? Hannes stood there bloodied, his grin narrow but sinister. He heard the laughter that bound him like ropes, and thought: *If even children laugh at me, then I'm already a legend.*

But the laughter didn't sound like glory. It sounded like the gallows.

A stone hit Anna in the shin. She hissed and bent forward, her eyes flashing like daggers. Another missile grazed Peter's forehead, leaving a red welt, and even he growled deep in his throat.

But it wasn't the pain that struck the gang. It was their faces. Those small, dirty faces, filled with hate. No fear, no insecurity—pure mockery, pure contempt.

"Bastard!" shrieked a girl with a torn dress. Her voice was so shrill that it echoed throughout the courtyard. "Gallows meat!" yelled a boy, barely taller than Hannes's knife. "Hang him, hang the dog!"

Their eyes burned. Young, but already poisoned. They spat words they had heard from their parents, words that had circulated through the alleys of Mainz. But on their lips, they were sharper, harder. Children's voices that sounded like ropes.

Klos tried to shout back, but a stone hit him in the temple. Blood ran down his face, and the children laughed even louder. Anna clenched her fists and kicked forward, but Hannes held her back. Peter stood motionless, but his gaze was gloomy, almost lost.

And Hannes himself? He saw those eyes—those young, hateful eyes—and felt himself torn apart. It wasn't anger, it wasn't pain. It was the certainty: Even the children of the town had already condemned him.

No judge, no executioner needed to speak anymore. The rope had long since been placed around his neck – by small hands that didn't even know how to hold a blade.

Klos was the first to freak out. He roared, swinging his chain like a madman, but the children jumped back laughing, only to immediately throw more stones. One hit him in the tooth, and he spat blood. "I'll kill you all, you little bastards!" he screamed, but his voice sounded more like a howl than a threat.

Anna spat back, a sharp jet into the dust, just in front of the children's bare feet. "Come on!" she hissed. "One more step and I'll tear you apart." But the little ones just laughed, pulled faces, and shouted curses they barely understood.

Peter stood there like a rock, motionless, his fists at his sides. A stone bounced off his shoulder; he didn't even flinch. But his eyes betrayed everything—they were dark, deeper than usual, as if he were consuming something inside that would never come out again.

And Hannes? He stood there bloodied, knife in hand, grinning that thin, cold grin. Every stone that hit him cut into his skin, but he didn't move. Only the gap between his teeth flashed. "Let them," he murmured. "Let them laugh. Let them throw. The more they spit, the bigger I am."

The gang looked at him, stunned. Klos wanted to rush forward, Anna growled, Peter clenched his fists. But Hannes' voice cut through the noise like a knife. "They throw because they know my name. Children or men, I don't give a shit – they know who I am."

And the children kept throwing.

One of the stones hit Anna hard on the temple. She staggered, blood immediately running hot down her cheek. Her patience was gone. She leaped forward like a cat, grabbing the thrower—a boy, maybe twelve, with dirt on his face and anger in his eyes.

The other children screamed and scattered, but Hannes's gang stood their ground, taut as bows. Anna yanked the boy up, holding him by the collar as if he were nothing but a struggling dog. "Do you want to throw, little one?" she snarled, her eyes full of venom. "Then you'll feel what it's like to be hit."

The boy shrieked, kicked at her, and punched her with his little fists. But he had no chance. Klos laughed and staggered forward. "Leave him to me! I'll show him how to handle stones!" He lifted the chain; the metal gleamed.

"No," Hannes growled, his voice cold. He stepped forward and took the boy's face in his hands, roughly, brutally. He looked into those eyes—young, full of hate, but also full of defiance. No pleading, no begging. Just pure contempt.

For a moment, Hannes hesitated. A child. Just a child. But the stones in his blood, the screams in his ears, said otherwise. *Child or not – the hatred is the same.*

He dropped the boy hard into the dust. "Run," he hissed. "But tell the others who had you in their hands. Tell them that Schinderhannes lets children live where men die."

The boy scrambled to his feet and ran, spitting as he ran away. And the children who remained laughed. Not out of courage, but out of mockery.

Hannes stood there, knife in his fist, and knew: Even children were no longer afraid. Only hatred.

The alley was empty, the children gone, but their laughter lingered like an echo. It hung in the walls, clinging to the stones, as if they had nailed their mockery into the dirt.

The gang stood still. Klos cursed, holding his forehead. Anna wiped the blood from her temple, her eyes burning, but she said nothing. Peter remained silent, but his fists were clenched so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

And Hannes? He stared into the dust where the boy had lain. He felt the burning on his skin, still heard the screams: *Bastard! Gallows meat!*

Children's voices, so light, so sharp. He knew: The adults hated him; that was nothing new. But if even the children were throwing stones, then his name was bigger than he thought. Bigger, but also heavier.

"They grow up with my name," he murmured, almost proudly, almost angrily. "Even before they know how to hold a knife, they know I'm the enemy."

Anna narrowed her eyes. "That means, Hannes... they're already laughing at the thought of your knitting."

The crows above the rooftops screamed and fluttered away as if they already sensed the next spectacle.

Hannes grinned narrowly, his gap dark between his teeth. "Let them laugh. I'll give them plenty of reasons. But when I fall... I'll laugh louder."

But deep in his stomach there was a gnawing feeling: the children had already put the rope around his neck – long before the executioner did.

A winter full of rats

Winter came like a knife, not cutting, but slowly scraping. Day by day, it bit deeper. Mainz froze under snow that wasn't white, but gray from smoke and yellow from dirt. Every breath burned in your chest, every movement was heavy, as if someone were pulling your bones from your body.

The markets were empty. No more bread in the baskets, no meat at the stalls. Only a few old women selling frozen turnips, harder than stones. The rich barricaded themselves behind walls, the poor died in the alleys, their bodies rigid, their mouths open like empty bowls.

Hannes' gang lived in a barn on the outskirts of town. The wind whistled through the cracks, the beams creaked, the straw was damp and covered in dirt. Klos coughed, Anna shivered despite the blankets, Peter stood as usual, but even his breathing sounded heavier.

And Hannes? Hannes felt hunger like a second heart in his chest. It didn't beat to the beat of blood, but to the ache in his stomach. Every day without prey made him wilder, harder, sharper.

They had coins, yes—but what good are coins when there's nothing left to buy? No innkeeper served liquor when his barrels were empty. No baker baked bread when there was no more flour. And so they sat there, with money in their pockets but empty stomachs.

"We're dying," Klos muttered, his teeth chattering. Anna stared into the fire, which was barely burning. "No," she hissed. "Rats die. Not us." But in the distance, they could already be heard scurrying, scratching, and squeaking.

And Hannes knew: Winter belonged to the rats.

They came in the night. At first, all they heard was scratching in the walls, then rustling in the straw. Small shadows scurried across the floor, shining eyes flashing in the dim firelight. Rats—fat, bold, and hungry, just like themselves.

Klos woke up, cursed, and punched the air with his fist. "Damned creatures!" But no sooner had one disappeared than two more appeared. They crawled through cracks, pounced on the last loaf as if it were a feast. The crust cracked, the crumbs flew—and before Hannes could chase them away, the bread was nothing but dust.

Anna jumped up, barefoot, her hair wild, waving a stick. "Get out of here, you filthy rats!" she screamed. But the rats were laughing, or so it sounded—a shrill squeal that cut through the night.

Peter stepped on one, hard, the cracking of the bones mingling with the squeaking. But even he couldn't stop them. For every one he crushed, three more appeared.

Hannes watched. Knife in hand, teeth bared. He recognized something in their movements, in their greed. They ate, they stole, they didn't care about anything. No fear, no shame. Just hunger.

"They're like us," he murmured. "Only smaller."

Klos heard it and laughed maniacally as he swatted at a rat. "Then we'll be the big rats, Hannes!" "No," Hannes growled, his eyes dark. "Not yet. But soon."

The rats scurried on, their eyes glowing like little fires. And the gang knew: they weren't alone in this barn. They had competition—hungry, relentless competition.

Klos had always had more liquor in his head than sense, and hunger made it worse. When the rats scurried through the straw again, he jumped up like a madman. The chain rattled in his hand, his eyes gleaming feverishly.

"I'll get you! You little bastards! You're eating our bread, you're eating our lives!" he roared, stumbling into the darkness.

He lashed out, the chain hissing through the air, crashing against beams, against walls, against everything except the rats. He laughed as he did so, that shrill, drunken, desperate laugh that sounded more like a howl.

A rat jumped on his leg and bit down. Klos screamed, staggered, and fell into the straw. "They're eating me! Hannes, they're eating me!" He nearly bruised his bones as he tried to shake the creatures off.

Anna stood in the shadows, her lips thin. "Leave him alone, maybe they'll realize he's just as stupid as they are." Peter finally took action, grabbed Klos by the collar, and yanked him up, the rat dangling from his leg until it let go and ran away screaming.

Klos was panting, his forehead bloody, his eyes glassy. "I hate them," he gasped. "I hate them more than the guards, more than the farmers, more than

anything!" Hannes looked at him for a long time, with that cold, narrow grin. "Hate doesn't make a difference, Klos. The rats eat because they're hungry. Just like us."

Klos shook his head, laughing hysterically. "No, Hannes... we're worse."

And in the silence that followed, they heard the rustling again. The rats were never defeated.

Anna was the only one who kept her head. While Klos raged and Peter remained silent, while Hannes grinned as if he saw his reflection in the rats, she sat by the fire stirring a pot.

"You don't chase them away with chains," she said without looking up. "You poison them."

The smell rising from the pot was sharp, acrid, burning in the nose. She'd found some old powder somewhere, herbs that killed more than cured, and stirred it into what little flour they had left. "If one rat eats it, it dies. If the next one eats the carcass, it dies too. So they fall, one after the other."

Klos stared into the pot, his face twisted. "And what if one of us eats?" Anna grinned coldly. "Then he's probably a rat too."

Peter was silent, but his gaze wandered from Anna to the pot, and it was clear that he was thinking—not about the rats, but about herself.

Hannes leaned back, knife in hand, grinning broadly. "Poison for the rats," he murmured. "Fine. But tell me, Anna... aren't we exactly that ourselves? We eat, we steal, we bite. And when one of us dies, the others turn on him."

She looked at him, her eyes black and sparkling. "Then we'll just poison ourselves. Who cares?"

For a moment the barn was silent, only the crackling of the fire and the rustling of the rats.

And Hannes thought: Maybe the poison has already been inside us.

Winter bit deeper, and even Peter, the tower, began to crack. He stood outside one evening while the others cursed, drank, and argued in the barn. The snow fell hard, whipping his face, but he didn't move.

Hannes stepped outside and saw him standing there—motionless, his shoulders covered with snowflakes, his breath like smoke. A rat lay dead on the ground, crushed by Peter's fist. Next to it, a second one, half-buried in the snow, its mouth open as if it wanted to scream.

Peter said nothing, but Hannes saw it. His fists were bloody, his knuckles bare. He hadn't kicked them or beat them with wood. He had strangled them with his hands, as if he wanted to personally show them that he was even stronger.

But his gaze was empty. No victory, no triumph. Only this dark, silent despair.

"They keep coming back," Hannes murmured. Peter nodded slowly. Just that one nod, heavy as stone.

Anna later stepped outside, saw the blood on his hands, and mocked: "The great tower is already beating rats. Soon he'll be biting into the crust himself." Peter didn't react. He just stood there, his fists in the snow, as if he needed to remember that he still had warm blood in his veins.

Hannes watched him, the knife loosely in his hand. *Even the strongest falls at some point, he thought. And if Peter falls, we'll be nothing more than rats without teeth.*

The snow settled on the animals' corpses as if it wanted to bury them. But they would come back. Always.

The next evening, they all sat around the meager fire again. Klos coughed and cursed, Anna silently stirred her poison, Peter kept his hands still in his lap. The straw rustled, rat eyes flashed in the shadows wherever the firelight didn't reach.

Then Hannes stood up. Blood on his chin from the last bite of hard bread, the scar like a second mouth on his face. He raised his knife as if it were a priest's staff and began to speak.

"Do you see them?" he growled, pointing into the darkness. "They eat, they steal, they sneak. Always hungry, always dirty, always in the shadows. And no one can kill them. Strike one, ten come after them."

Klos laughed hoarsely. "Shitty creatures!" "Shitty creatures?" Hannes grinned broadly. "No. Brothers. Mirrors. We're nothing but them."

Anna raised her head, her eyes cold. "Go on, bastard." "We eat what we can get. We take what isn't ours. We go into other people's houses, and they hate us for it. But they don't kill us. They beat us, they kick us, they set traps—and we come back. We're rats. Big, hungry rats."

Peter looked at him for a long time, and for a moment his lips twitched—almost a grin.

Hannes stepped closer to the fire, the knife flashing. "So stop whining, stop whining. Look at you—you want to be kings? You're rats. But rats who laugh while they eat. Rats who bite until the gallows itself cracks."

It wasn't a speech, it was a confession. A curse.

And in the barn, the scratching of the real rats echoed like applause.

The night was silent, but not empty. The fire smoldered, the gang huddled around it like shadows, each with their own thoughts, each hungry, each angry. There was a rustling in the darkness. Always. The scratching of small claws in the straw, the quiet squeaking, the scurrying in the shadows.

Hannes lay half-on his back, knife in hand, eyes open. He heard them coming and going, saw them in the corner of his eye. Rats – unstoppable, invincible.

And he knew: It wasn't just winter that was hunting them. It was life itself. Every winter, every year, every damned piece of bread was a fight against rats—and he was one of them.

"When the snow melts," he murmured, "we're no better. Just bigger." Anna looked at him, her gaze dark, but she didn't argue. Klos laughed softly, a hoarse, demented giggle. "Then we'll just bite harder." Peter remained silent, but his hands twitched in time, as if he were crushing the rodents in his fists.

Above them the crows screeched as if they had already smelled who would not survive the winter.

And Hannes grinned, his gaping teeth dark. "Rats don't die," he said. "They just grow in number."

But deep down, he knew this winter would tear them apart. And if they survived it, it would be not as humans, but as animals who had learned to eat the dirt.

Whores, demons, disaster

The dive glowed like an open mouth. Smoke hung in the air, music stumbled from one corner to the other, mugs clinked. But the loudest of all was the laughter—shrill, sharp, the laughter of the women.

They squatted everywhere. On laps, on tables, in dark corners. Lips red, skin pale, clothes too thin for winter. Perfume that stank more than it attracted, mixed with sweat and liquor. And yet it was sweet enough to attract the men like flies.

Hannes entered, his coat open, a knife at his belt, and immediately their eyes fell on him. "That's him," they whispered. "The bastard. The robber. Schinderhannes." And then they came, like cats. Fingernails down his arm, lips against his ear, voices promising what he had long known: It wasn't consolation, just a bargain.

Klos staggered behind, his chain clinking, immediately grabbed by two prostitutes who squeezed him like a purse. He hooted, laughed, and fell over. Anna remained in the shadows, her eyes cold, her lips thin. Peter followed as always, tall, silent, out of place amidst all the noise.

The women smelled him. Hannes. His blood, his hunger, his greed. They sat on his lap, they tugged at his coat, they whispered: "You're the kind of guy who wants everything, aren't you?"

And Hannes grinned, broadly and darkly. "Anything," he growled. "Even if it burns me."

The prostitutes laughed. And the disaster began.

The liquor flowed like rain through a leaky roof. Pitchers were tipped, cups emptied, bottles broken. Every sip burned the throat, but it warmed, made one loud, and blinded one.

Hannes absorbed him until the scar on his face glowed like fire. Whores on his knees, hands in his hair, tongues on his neck. Their voices blurred with the men's howling, with the blaring music.

Klos laughed, drooled, and slid under the table while two women fed him like a bear they were about to skin. Peter drank silently, but even in his eyes the light of intoxication glowed. Anna sat back, cup in hand, her lips curling into a grin that didn't match her expression.

Everything vibrated. The dive sweated, breathed, and wheezed. The air was full of smoke, sweat, and the sweet stench of wine and perfume. Men slammed into the pews, laughing, women screamed as if in lust, but it was just noise.

And Hannes? He drank, he laughed, he grabbed skin, flesh, anything he could reach. Every drop of liquor didn't wash away the filth inside him—it only made it bigger.

He felt like a king on a throne of women and cups. A king of smoke, sweat, and glass. But deep in his intoxication, something else was already beating. Something darker.

The demons weren't far away. They were just waiting for him to take the next sip.

The liquor was too strong, the smoke too thick, the laughter too loud – and suddenly it began. First a flicker in the candles, then shadows that were longer than they should have been.

Hannes blinked, his eyes half drunk, half delusional. And there they were: faces. No prostitutes, no guests—dead people. Men with slit throats, women with empty eyes, children throwing stones. Everyone he'd left behind was now sitting at the table.

They laughed. Not warm, not human—that harsh, scratchy laughter that made his stomach churn. One raised a cup, which overflowed, not with liquor, but with blood. "To you, bastard," he hissed. "You're one of us."

Hannes opened his eyes wide and reached for the knife. A prostitute giggled, thinking he was playing, and bit his ear. But he saw the boy with the bowl of soup, saw Jacob, his fingers mutilated, standing next to her, grinning.

Klos lay under the table, snorting, noticing nothing. Peter stared as if he had seen something himself, but he remained silent. Anna looked at Hannes—long, deeply—and her eyes betrayed that she knew what he saw.

The demons weren't shadows. They were in his head, in his blood, in every drop of liquor. They sat at the table with him, laughing louder than the prostitutes, louder than the men.

And Hannes laughed back—roughly, brokenly, almost like a dog. Because he knew they would never disappear again.

Anna sat with her arms crossed, her cup half full, staring at the spectacle. Hannes was drunk, prostitutes on his lap, hands everywhere. He was laughing, but she heard the crack in his voice.

The whores giggled, rubbed themselves against him, whispered in his ear: "You are strong, bastard. You are our king." One placed her hand on his chest, the other playfully bit his lip. They laughed as if he were a treasure. But Anna saw it differently: They laughed because they knew he would pay. With coins or with blood, it didn't matter.

"Schinderhannes," one mocked, "show us your knife, not just your teeth." She giggled, but Anna heard the hunger in it—not for him, but for what he was wearing.

Anna drank slowly, her eyes cold. She knew she had more in Hannes than any of them. Not love, not tenderness—no, she was his mirror, his shadow side. She knew him, while the others only knew his skin.

A prostitute noticed her look and grinned cheekily. "Jealous, sweetie?" she asked, wiggling her hips and pressing herself closer against Hannes.

Anna stood up slowly, her fingers sliding over the dagger at her belt. She stepped to the table and leaned forward, her lips close to the woman's ear. "If you keep laughing like that," she hissed, "I'll rip your mouth open."

The whore fell silent, her eyes widened, her giggles choked in her throat.

Hannes laughed even louder, blood and liquor dripping from his teeth. "Leave her alone, Anna. You can tell demons by their laughter."

Anna sat back down, the knife still in her hand. And there was no jealousy in her eyes—only the knowledge: whores were demons. And demons will eventually devour you.

It began as always—with one word too many. A man, fat, drunk, with his hands on a prostitute, cast a sideways glance at Hannes. "The bastard," he slurred, "probably thinks he's a king just because he's got a few women on his lap."

The prostitutes giggled, one laughed, a pitcher tipped over. Klos jumped up, staggering, the chain clutched in his fist. "Say it again, you swine!" he yelled, but he stumbled and knocked over two chairs.

Anna stood up immediately, her eyes cold as glass. Peter moved slowly, but his gaze was hard, as if he had already heard the blow before it came.

Hannes grinned. Broad, bloody, crazy. "King?" he said, his voice rough. "Then I'll show you how one rules."

He stood up, grabbed the gun he always carried with him these days, and punched the man across the face. Blood spurted, teeth flew, the guy crashed onto the table, and the prostitute screamed.

That was the spark. The bar immediately erupted. Mugs flew, knives flashed, men screamed. A bench tipped over, a window shattered, and the laughter turned into roars.

Klos lashed out blindly, the chain hissing through the air, striking flesh, striking bone. Anna was a dagger in the darkness, her blade flashing faster than the screams. Peter stood like a tower, striking down everything that came near him until the first bodies lay on the ground.

And Hannes? Hannes laughed as he plowed through the crowd with a gun and a knife. A king in chaos, a demon in the flesh.

The whores screamed, the music fell silent, and above all there was the splintering, the howling, the first gurgle of a dying man.

The disaster had begun – and it consumed everything.

The dive transformed into a battlefield. The floor was wet with beer and blood, shards of glass crunched under boots, screams cut through the smoke. Prostitutes screamed and ran shrieking between the tables, some barefoot, some with clothes already in tatters.

Klos spun like a madman, whirling the chain until it ripped off a man's ear. He roared with joy, staggered, and continued to beat as if he were the storm itself. Anna was precision in chaos—cold, swift. Her blade flashed, disappeared, flashed again. Men slumped as if she had cut the laughter right out of their throats. Peter was a battering ram. Not a word, just fists, elbows, shoulders. He crashed through people, tables, chairs. Anyone who came near him flew to the ground like a sack of flour.

And Hannes? Hannes was the bastard king at the center. Knife in one hand, pistol in the other, grinning bloody. He hit, he stabbed, he laughed. A shot rang out, the smoke mingled with the sweat, and for a moment everything was silent—until the next screaming began.

The prostitutes pressed against the walls, screaming, crying, cursing. Some grabbed the pockets of the dead while they were still twitching. Demons in skirts, devouring whatever they could, even in the chaos.

A table tipped over, fire caught a curtain, and the smoke grew thicker. Coughing, screaming, noise—everything mingled.

The tavern was no longer a place. It was an abyss. A disaster that smelled of blood, sweat, and cheap perfume.

And in the middle stood Hannes, his eyes black, his scar red, and yelled: “This is my kingdom!”

Smoke hung heavy over the tavern. The fire was out, but the air stank of burnt wood, liquor, and blood. Bodies lay everywhere—some gasping, some still. Tables broken, chairs splintered, mugs smashed.

The prostitutes sat against the walls, their makeup smeared, their clothes wet with tears and beer. Some laughed hysterically, others cradled the dead as if they had been lovers. Demons in dresses, condemned to play the same game over and over again, between pleasure and pain.

Klos lay in the dirt, grinning bloodily, the chain on his chest as if he had won the war. Anna wiped her knife, her eyes sharp and full of venom. Peter stood like a tower, blood up to his elbows, but silent as always.

And Hannes? He sat on a table, his gun loosely in his hand, his knife at his belt, grinning into the void. He heard them, the voices—the prostitutes, the demons, the dead. They laughed quietly, somewhere in his head.

"That's how it always ends," he murmured. "First skin, then blood, then fire."

Anna looked up, her eyes cold. "Prostitutes, demons, disaster. All the same."

Hannes nodded, spat into the straw, and stood up. "And everything belongs to us."

But deep down, he knew: every whore, every demon, every disaster was just another step toward the rope. And the birds would be happy.

The dance on the market

The Mainz market was an organism of its own. It breathed, sweated, and stank. Fish heads lay in buckets, pig blood dripped from the tables, cheese fermented in the sun, spices burned one's nostrils. Voices shouted in confusion: prices, curses, prayers.

Women pushed through the crush, children tugged at skirts, vendors banged their hands on their stalls as if they could rouse shoppers. Beggars squatted in the shadows, stretching out their bony fingers, while bakers held their rolls up to the sky as if they were offerings from the gods.

Laughter, shouting, and the hammering of wood and iron hummed above everything. The market was the heart of the city—loud, smelly, and vibrant.

Klos sniffed the air, grinned, almost drooling. "Smells like food, bastard." Anna grimaced. "Smells like dirt." Peter remained silent, but his gaze wandered over the crowd, calm, watchful.

And Hannes? Hannes absorbed the chaos like schnapps. His scar burned, the gap in his teeth flashed in his grin. "See?" he said. "This isn't just a market. It's a stage."

And he knew: today he would dance on it.

They didn't come sneaking, not secretly. No – Hannes led his gang right through the crowd as if they already owned the damned market.

Klos in front, the chain over his shoulder, slurring and bawling, he pushed aside two children playing with chestnuts. Anna behind him, her eyes cold, her knife

invisible but ready. Peter the Last, a tower that made room simply because no one wanted to stand next to this rock.

And Hannes in the middle, legs wide apart, grinning darkly, scarred red, gun at his belt. He didn't walk, he strode. Slowly, heavily, as if every step pushed the market a little deeper into the ground.

The crowd sensed it immediately. Voices grew quieter, gazes sharper. A few merchants fell silent in the middle of haggling. Women pulled their children back, beggars crouched deeper into the shadows. But no one screamed, no one called for the guards. Not yet.

"There he is," whispered one. "The bastard." "Schinderhannes," murmured another, as if he had seen the devil himself.

And the crows circling above the market let out a shrill caw, as if they had been waiting for this spectacle.

Hannes spread his arms, turned slowly in a circle, and his voice cut through the murmuring like a knife: "Look! The king is dancing!"

An old merchant stood there, a table laden with apples. Wrinkled hands, a face as wrinkled as a dried-up sack, his voice croaking like a raven. "Fresh produce! Red as blood! Only two coppers apiece!"

Hannes walked straight toward him. Slowly, with that grin that never promised what it kept. The merchant didn't back down. Maybe he was too proud, maybe too stupid. Maybe he thought the bastard didn't care about two copper coins.

"Nice fruit," Hannes murmured, picking up an apple, turning it, and biting into it. The cracking sound echoed across the square. Juice ran down his chin, dripping onto his coat. He chewed, then spat half into the dirt.

"Two coppers," repeated the old man, his voice now thinner.

Hannes grinned. "Two coppers?" He put the apple back – half-eaten, covered in saliva. "For you, old man, I'll pay with music."

He snapped his fingers, and Klos slammed the chain down hard on the table. Apples bounced in all directions, rolling across the floor, children grabbed them, and the crowd backed away. The old man shouted, trying to stop them, but Anna stepped forward and roughly pushed him back.

"There!" cried Hannes, laughing loudly and sharply. "There's your dance, old man! Collect your fruit before the dogs eat it!"

The merchant stumbled after him, while Klos cheered, Anna mocked, and Peter stood behind him like a shadow.

The crowd stared. Some looked away, others laughed uncertainly. But Hannes knew: Now he had her.

The dance had begun.

The first apple had barely landed in the dirt when the screaming erupted. Children fought over the fruit, women screamed, and vendors cursed. One tried to push Hannes away—a mistake.

Klos laughed, slapped the chain across his stall, boards splintered, cheese rolled across the floor. Another merchant leaped forward, but Anna drew her knife just a fraction, flashed it, and the man stumbled back, white as chalk.

"Dance, Mainz!" Hannes yelled, spinning in the middle of the square, arms outstretched, grinning broadly. "Dance for your bastard!"

The crowd retreated, pressing against the houses, but the commotion grew. A pig tied to a stall broke free, ran squealing through the crowd, and knocked over a basket. Bread rolled across the ground, and beggars immediately pounced on it as if it were for gold.

Peter knocked over a stall with just his shoulder. The noise echoed across the square like thunder. Barrels tipped over, beer spilled across the floor, and children splashed in it while the adults screamed.

And Hannes? He laughed, picked up the half-eaten apple from the ground, and bit into it again. "See?" he cried with his mouth full. "Everyone dances when Schinderhannes plays the music!"

The crowd raged, oscillating between fear and fury. Merchants tried to salvage what they could, women dragged children away, beggars fought for bread in the dirt.

And above it all lay this cawing. Crows perched on the roof ridge fluttered and laughed along.

The dance had found its rhythm – and it was chaos.

A stone flew. No one knew who threw it. It hit Klos's shoulder, and he staggered for only a moment—then he kicked back. The chain hissed through the air, hitting a man in the head. A crack, a scream, blood splattered onto the cheese in the dirt.

The crowd went wild. Some fled, others grabbed sticks, knives, anything they could find. A market quickly became a slaughterhouse.

Anna stood in the middle, cold as steel, a knife in her fist. She laughed briefly and plunged it into a merchant's thigh, causing him to collapse with a roar. "Dance, old man!" she hissed, and continued spinning as if it were a round dance.

Peter moved slowly, but every blow was a judgment. He grabbed one, lifted it up, and hurled it against a stall, shattering boards and sending apples flying.

And Hannes? Hannes turned around, grinning darkly, pistol in hand. He fired a shot into the air – the bang thundered across the market, smoke hung like a curtain. Everything froze for a moment, then the panic finally broke out.

He pushed a man aside, plunged the knife into his stomach, and pulled it out again, blood spurting across the floor. He stepped back, turned, and spread his arms. "See? This is my dance! Blood is my beat!"

The crowd screamed, ran, and pushed each other down. Bread, blood, and beer—everything mingled on the pavement.

And the crows above them screeched, fluttering lower, as if they could hardly wait to gather the remains of the dance.

The chaos had barely reached its peak when metal clanged through the noise. Heavy boots, commands, the snorting of horses. The city guards.

They came in a line, spears extended, helmets gleaming in the light. Their voices were harsh, their steps steady—an alien rhythm that clashed with Hannes's dance.

"Arrest him!" one yelled. "Get the bastard!"

The crowd dispersed, forming lanes for the men in irons. Cries mingled with prayers, and suddenly the market was no longer chaos, but a stage: here the guards, there Hannes and his gang.

Klos raged, swinging the chain as if he could bring down an entire army. A spear narrowly missed him, tearing his skin; he roared like an animal and kept striking. Anna stood deeper in the shadows, ducking, stabbing whenever a guard came too close—quick, precise, cold. Peter charged the front, his fists like hammers. Each blow sent a guard staggering, but there were many, too many.

And Hannes? Hannes stood in the middle of the square, pistol in hand, knife in his belt. He raised the weapon and fired. A guard fell, a hole in his chest, the crowd screamed. A second shot—gunpowder, smoke, screams.

"DANCE!" Hannes yelled, laughing as the guards approached. "DANCE FOR ME!"

Market stalls shattered, spears crashed, and blood spurted. It was no longer a market—it was a battlefield.

And somewhere above the rooftops the crows laughed because they knew the dance was far from over.

The market was nothing but a battlefield. Blood and beer ran in rivulets across the pavement, between broken carts and trampled fruit. The screams had died away, leaving only groans, whimpers, and the creaking of the retreating guards.

Klos lay gasping against an overturned barrel, chain in hand, his face bloody but grinning. Anna wiped her knife on a piece of canvas, her eyes sharp as ever. Peter stood still, his chest heaving, blood dripping from his knuckles as if he'd slapped it directly from their bodies.

And Hannes? He stood in the middle of the dirt, the gun still warm in his fist, a wide grin, a gap in his teeth black. He looked around, absorbing the chaos like a trance.

The crowd was already whispering: "The bastard... he's dancing in the market... Schinderhannes..." The name flew through the air like smoke, spread like fire.

Hannes heard it, and he knew: This wasn't a victory. It was a stamp. With every drop of blood he shed here, he was burned deeper into the city. Not as a king, not as a hero—but as a fool, as a demon, as the one who dances with death.

He spat in the dust, put away his gun, and laughed. "Let them talk. Let them tremble. I'll keep dancing until the rope breaks."

Above them the crows screeched, fluttering lower as if they knew: the next dance would soon be played.

Nights without a morning

They lost track of the days. First it was just the booze, then the smoke, then the blood. Soon they no longer knew whether it was Monday, Friday, or the damned end of the world. Everything was night. Everything was dark.

The gang moved from dive bar to dive bar, from stable to stable. The same stench was everywhere: stale smoke, vomit, wet dog, cheap perfume. The same faces everywhere: prostitutes with empty eyes, innkeepers with long fingers, farmers who had drunk too much to defend themselves.

They laughed, they hit, they ate, they fucked—and the next day it was as if nothing had happened. No morning, just a new night that stank just as much as the last.

Klos was the first to lose track of time. He once yelled in the middle of the tavern: "It's always night, bastard! Always night! We wake up and it's already dark again!" – and he laughed until he fell over.

Anna drank more quietly, but more deeply. Her eyes sparkled in the shadows, as if they could still see through the fog. But even she lost track, talking of hours that didn't exist and people who weren't there.

Peter remained silent, as always, but his silence had grown heavier. He no longer counted the nights—he just stood there, fists at the ready, as if every hour would bring an enemy.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, even though his teeth were bleeding. For him, it was no loss that there were no more tomorrows. Tomorrow meant waiting, order, hope. Night meant intoxication, blood, freedom.

"Tomorrow is for farmers," he growled as he lay in the straw with his knife. "It's night for us."

And the gang believed it – because they had nothing else left.

The liquor became their calendar. Each cup a new day, each pitcher a new week. They didn't drink to celebrate, not to warm themselves—they drank to forget that a world even existed outside.

The tavern owners already knew them. Hannes and his gang brought coins to the bar, and immediately the poison flowed. The barmen trembled, but they poured more, more and more, because the bastard with the scar was worth more than their fear.

Klos drank until he fell over, drooled, snored, vomited on the floorboards—and ordered another mug as soon as he could breathe again. Anna held the mug like a weapon, drank quietly but quickly, and looked at everyone as if she could kill more drunk than sober. Peter drank slowly, steadily, but incessantly—a silent tower, cast deeper into the shadows with every sip.

And Hannes? Hannes laughed. Every drop burned through him, washing away guilt, hunger, doubt—for a moment. For an hour. For a night. Until the next morning came. But it never came. The intoxication was morning, midday, and evening.

The night was her kingdom, and liquor was her king.

"Drink!" Hannes yelled, raising his mug. "Drink until the sun dies!"

And they did. Every sip a cut into the flesh of reason, every intoxication a dance on the edge.

They took refuge in alcohol because everything else was worse. But intoxication wasn't a haven. It was a sea—and they drowned in it.

When the schnapps finally struck him down, Hannes couldn't sleep—only images of hell. He lay in the straw, pistol at his side, knife in his fist, and yet the cold still came from within.

The dead came first. Jacob with the bowl of soup, his fingers red with blood, his eyes hollow. Behind him, the children with stones, laughing at him as they hit him. Then the men from the market, blood still fresh on their lips, the women from the taverns, their laughter full of poison.

They all stood around him, their voices mingling, shrill, muffled, mocking. "Bastard," they whispered. "Gallows meat. King without a crown."

Hannes screamed in his sleep, jumped up, grabbed his gun, and fired into the darkness. Klos laughed, thinking he was only dreaming about prostitutes. Anna looked at him, coldly, knowingly, and said nothing. Peter stood silent, as if he had seen the shadows too.

But the nightmares wouldn't let go. Every night the same thing: faces, blood, laughter. And every time he woke up, sweating, cursing, then grinning crookedly as if it were a joke. "Demons," he muttered, "demons laugh louder than the living."

But deep down, he knew: the dead were more loyal than the living. They never left him alone.

When the nights were at their darkest, only Anna spoke. Not with laughter, not with screaming—with words like poison, quiet but sharp.

She sat in the shadows, her back against the wall, her legs drawn up, a cup in her hand. Her face half lit by the fire, half swallowed by darkness. She didn't talk much, but when she did, her sentences burned longer than any knife.

"You drink because you're afraid, Hannes," she said as he downed his third bottle. He grinned, his gaping teeth black. "Afraid? Me? I'm just thirsty." "Thirst for forgetting," she snarled. "But you never forget. You just dream deeper."

Sometimes she spoke of herself, and her voice grew even harder. "I'm like you. No tomorrow. Only nights. But I don't need a dream, a rope. I only have my knife—and that's enough."

The prostitutes might touch Hannes, might call him king. But Anna was the mirror that showed him what he truly was: a dog in the dirt, laughing while he bit.

Klos rarely listened to her, only babbling. Peter remained silent, but his eyes betrayed that he heard every word.

And Hannes? He drank, grinned, and spat into the fire. But his stomach gnawed. Anna didn't tell lies. She spoke the darkness he didn't want to admit.

And sometimes, when she looked at him for too long, he thought: Maybe she's my rope, not the gallows.

Klos was never more than a dog in the dirt, but on those nights, he became a broken dog. The booze ate him from the inside, hunger gnawed at him from the outside, and soon all that was left of him was a drooling wreck.

He drank until he couldn't stand, vomited on the floorboards, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and ordered another pitcher. His face was puffy, his eyes red, his hands trembled like leaves in the wind. But when someone laughed, he laughed louder, roaring as if he could use them to brace himself against the night.

Once, he fell over in the middle of the dive, his head crashing onto a table, blood running down his forehead. The prostitutes screamed, and a few peasants kicked him aside like a sack of potatoes. Hannes grinned, but didn't help him up. Anna watched, cold and silent. Only Peter picked him up and carried him out like a sack.

"I'm not dying," Klos slurred as he lay in the dirt, his blood mixed with the liquor. "I'll drink you all under the table. I'll drink death away."

But his breath was rattling, his hands grasping at nothing, as if searching for a hold he had long since lost.

Hannes stood over him, gun loosely in hand, grinning narrowly. "Maybe death will eat you while you're drunk, Klos. And then you won't laugh anymore."

But Klos laughed—bloody, vomiting, whimpering. A dog laughing while he died.

And no one knew if he would even see the next night.

For weeks, Peter had uttered little more than a growl. He stood, he hit, he drank—but his voice remained locked like a chest without a key. Until that night.

The gang huddled in a barn, the fire small, the smoke acrid. Klos wheezed in the straw, half-conscious. Anna stared into the darkness, knife in hand. Hannes drank, grinning, his scar glowing in the firelight.

Then Peter spoke. Deep, heavy, like stones falling from a mountain.

"We're dying," he said. Just that. Three words that weighed more heavily than any gunshot, any laugh.

Hannes froze, cup in hand. Anna blinked as if she'd seen a ghost. Even Klos raised his head, his mouth bloody, and whispered, "Did he... talk?"

Peter didn't look up, his fists resting on his knees, large and still. "We're dying," he repeated. "Not today. Not tomorrow. But soon. On a night like this. Without tomorrow."

The words echoed in the barn, heavier than the crackling of the fire, louder than the wheezing of toilets.

Hannes grinned, thin and dark. "Then we'll just laugh until it happens." Peter raised his eyes, looked at him—and there was nothing but truth in his eyes.

The night grew colder and no one spoke anymore.

The barn was silent, except for the crackling fire. Outside, the wind screamed as if it were tearing the world apart. Inside, the gang sat, each trapped in their own darkness.

Klos lay in the straw, drooling, wheezing, laughing softly in his sleep—as if he were still cracking jokes even as he died. Anna stared into the void, her fingers playing with the knife as if it were the only certainty she had left. Peter sat like a stone, his fists on his knees, his face hard, but his words still hung in the air like smoke: *We're dying*.

And Hannes? He lay on his back, the knife beside him, the gun at his belt. The scar burned, his eyes open. He heard the voices—the dead, the children, the prostitutes, the demons. They laughed, they screamed, they whispered. And in every sound lay the same thing: *No tomorrow*.

He grinned, thin and dark. "Then we'll just dance in the night," he murmured. "Until the rope takes us."

The crows outside fluttered up as if they had heard it, as if they had already bent over the corpses.

And Hannes knew: every night without a morning was a step closer to the gallows. But he loved the step—because he was king only at night.

Knife in the straw

Winter had cleared the streets, made the dives overcrowded, and the alleys dangerous. So they ended up back where they always ended up when the city was fed up with them: in a damned barn on the outskirts of Mainz.

The roof sagged, the wind whistled through the cracks, and the straw was damp and smelled of rat pee. But there was a roof over our heads, a fire in the corner, and that was enough.

Klos immediately threw herself into the straw as if she were a soft wench, giggling, coughing, and reaching for the bottle. "My palace!" he roared, straw in his beard. Anna sat down to one side, the knife on her knees, her eyes sharp as needles. She didn't speak, but her gaze was harder than the frost outside. Peter stood as always, his back against the beam, his arms crossed. He seemed the only one who understood that these walls offered little protection.

And Hannes? He spread out his coat and lay halfway down in the straw, his pistol beside him, his knife within easy reach. He grinned, even though the cold was chapping his lips.

"Shitty refuge," he muttered. "But better than the gallows."

The barn creaked, the fire crackled, and there was more than just peace in the rustling of the straw. It was as if there was a knife beneath every stalk, just waiting to be pulled out.

The fire crackled dimly, casting shadows longer than they should have. Klos babbled quiet songs no one understood as he rummaged through the straw like an animal trying to bury itself.

Anna didn't speak aloud, but her words cut through the darkness like needles. "Tell me, Hannes, how long will we continue like this? Until the straw becomes our grave? Or until one of us slits the other's throat?"

Hannes grinned and blew smoke out of his nose. "Slit my throat if you can. But then you'll have to replace me. And none of you have the mouth for that."

Klos snorted, coughed, and giggled. "I'm a mouthful. I'll sing if you hang." He swallowed schnapps, and the fire reflected in his glassy eyes. "You'd bite your own tongue off," Anna mocked.

Peter was silent, but you could hear him clenching his fists, the cracking of his joints louder than any words.

The straw rustled, rats scurried through, but no one swatted at them. Everyone was too busy keeping an eye on each other.

There was a whisper in the air—not a conversation, but an unspoken knowledge: In this barn, every enemy was as close as friend.

And Hannes just grinned wider. "That's good," he murmured. "Friends fall asleep. Enemies stay awake."

The crackling of the fire was barely there anymore, the night lay heavy on the barn. There was a rustling in the straw – sharp, faster than a rat. A spark of metal flashed.

Anna had the knife in her hand before anyone could breathe. She held it low, close to her hip, the blade short but deadly. Her gaze wasn't directed outward—it was directed at Hannes.

"One day, bastard," she hissed. "You'll wake up and the straw will be red."

Klos roared, staggering half to his knees. "Then hold something for me, Anna! I want to cut myself!" His fingers rummaged in his jacket, searching for a blade, but found only the chain, which clattered to the floor.

Peter stepped forward, his fists heavy, his shadow large. He said nothing—and he didn't need to. Everyone knew: if he hit, it would be the end, no matter who fell.

And Hannes? He grinned. Wide, bloody, full of teeth. He stretched out his arms, half-lying in the straw, as if inviting them all. "Come on," he murmured. "Who's first? Knives, chains, fists—it doesn't matter. I'll get back up. And if I don't, you'll dance on my grave."

The straw crackled, the air was heavy, the fire spewed sparks. For a brief moment, everything was silent—until a rat scurried out of the corner, right between Anna and Hannes.

The knife twitched. A blink of an eye, and the blade was stuck in the ground. The rat was dead.

"Next time it's your turn," whispered Anna, without taking her eyes off Hannes.

And the straw smelled of blood.

Klos had seen too much, drunk too much, swallowed too much to remain silent. The knife in the straw, the rat's blood, Anna's look—it made him boil.

He jumped up, staggering, the chain in his fist, his face red from the booze and covered in saliva. "Fuck rats!" he yelled. "We are the bastards! We are the knives! And I'll cut you all open if you keep whispering!"

He twirled the chain through the air, so close to Hannes that the wind rippled through his hair. Anna ducked, knife still in her hand, ready to stab. Peter stepped forward like a mountain no one could push away.

"Calm down, Klos," said Hannes, his voice deep, his grin cold. "Put down the chain before you strangle yourself." But Klos laughed, that crazy, drooling laugh. "Strangle? I'll strangle you! I'll strangle you, bastard!" He slammed the chain against the beam, wood splintering, sparks flying.

Anna hissed, "The dog's going crazy." Peter clenched his fists, but Hannes raised his hand. "Let him. Let him rage. Maybe then he'll realize he's nothing but a whining cur."

Klos's eyes flickered, between hatred, fear, and madness. He swayed, the chain threatening to strike again—at whom, it wasn't clear.

The barn held its breath. The straw rustled as if it itself were afraid of blood.

And Hannes grinned wider. "Come on, Klos. Hit. Show us if you're a man—or just a barking dog."

Klos's chain crashed against the beam a second time, dust falling. But Anna paid no attention to him. Her gaze was fixed on Hannes—sharp, bright, like a blade in the darkness.

"You're playing with us," she hissed, the knife still in her hand. "You push us against each other, let Klos rage, keep Peter silent, and I'm supposed to be the one to pull the knife. But you know what, bastard? I don't need your game. I just need your neck."

Hannes grinned broadly, his gaping teeth black. "Then come on. Slit my throat. But if you do it, Anna, do it quickly. Because if I get another breath, I'll laugh in your face while you watch everything here burn."

Her eyes flashed, her fingers twitched. For a moment, she was close. The gang held its breath. Klos roared, Peter clenched his fists, the fire crackled as if it wanted to watch.

Then Anna laughed. Hard, dry, cold. "Not yet," she said. "You won't die in the straw. You'll die in front of everyone. In the market, on the gallows—I want to be there."

Hannes nodded slowly, his grin still intact. "Then we're in agreement."

The tension didn't ease, it only changed. No knife stabbed, no blood flowed – but everyone in the barn knew: There had long been a noose between Anna and Hannes.

And at some point someone would pull it.

Klos was still babbling, the chain wildly in his hand, Anna's knife at the ready, Hannes grinning like an executioner. The straw crackled, the barn held its breath – then Peter moved.

He stepped forward, slowly, but each step felt like a blow. The shadow of his shoulders fell over them all, and suddenly the space felt narrower, heavier.

Without a word, he grabbed Klos's arm. A single movement, but the chain immediately slipped from his grasp and landed weakly in the straw. Klos yelped, tried to defend himself, but Peter's fist pressed down on his chest, pressing him down until he gasped like a dog being deprived of air.

Then he turned to Anna. His gaze fell on the knife, and he didn't need to speak. She looked at him, hissed softly—but her hand lowered, and the blade disappeared back into the straw.

Hannes remained seated, grinning, just watching. "The great tower keeps us alive," he murmured, almost amused. "Without you, Peter, we would all be dead long ago."

Peter looked at him, silent, his eyes dark. And for the first time, there was not only strength in that look, but also weariness. As if even he understood: You can't hold knives down in straw forever. At some point, they'll cut right through.

Klos gasped, Anna was silent, Hannes grinned.

And Peter stood there—a stone that held the storm. But even stones break if the fire burns beneath them long enough.

The barn had become quieter, but the silence wasn't peace. It was the silence after a storm—the silence that just waits for the next blow to fall.

Klos lay in the straw, wheezing, drooling, his fingers still clutching the air as if holding an invisible chain. Anna sat back, the knife hidden again, but everyone knew how close it had just been to Hannes's neck. Peter stood in the shadows, motionless, his chest heavy, as if he were carrying the bonds like stones on his shoulders.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, broadly, coldly, his gaping teeth black. He hadn't drawn a knife, hadn't said a word too much. But he knew: The knife had been drawn long ago, just invisible. It lay between them all, hidden in the straw, ready to stab if the night grew any darker.

He looked at them, one by one. "You think the straw is soft," he murmured. "But it's only rustling so we don't hear the knife."

Outside, the wind howled, a door slammed somewhere in the distance. The fire crackled, the shadows twitched.

And in the belly of the barn lay the truth: Not the guards, not the gallows, not the crows would get her first. It would be one of them.

A knife in the straw – and one would not get up again.

The hunger for fame

Mainz was full of voices, and Hannes heard them all. Not the sermons of the priests, not the wailing of the beggars – no. His name. Everywhere.

"Schinderhannes," the children whispered as they ran through the narrow streets. They didn't throw stones this time; they turned him into a game: one chased, one fled, and always the hunter was called "the Bastard."

The merchants spoke of him as they stacked their wares. "Watch out, or he'll come and take half of yours." The prostitutes laughed at him, calling among their customers, "Schinderhannes dances better than you!" Even the old men

spat out the name as if it were poison—but poison that everyone had in their mouths.

Hannes absorbed it like schnapps. Every sound, every whisper was a bite he devoured. Not bread, not meat—words. They didn't satisfy him, but they made him bigger.

Anna heard it too. Her eyes narrowed when people whispered behind her back. Peter walked on silently, but you could see his shoulders tensing, as if he carried not only the gang, but also the name. Klos grinned, almost drooling. "They're talking about us, bastard! They're talking because they're scared!"

And Hannes? Hannes grinned wider, his scar glowing red, his gaping teeth flashing.

"Let them whisper," he murmured. "Soon they'll scream."

In the taverns, his name was already bigger than he was. He didn't even have to enter anymore—the stories preceded him.

"Did you hear that?" roared a red-nosed farmer. "Schinderhannes killed ten guards last week by himself! With his bare fists!" Another laughed, beer in his beard. "Bare fists? Ha! I heard he stared three men to death with one look! One look, you understand?" The prostitutes giggled, one whispered, "And the women—he fucks anyone he wants, and when he's done, she dances for another three nights!"

The laughter was loud, the schnapps flowed. And Hannes? He sat in the shade, his hat pulled low over his face, listening. Every word was a blow to his heart—not pain, but a rush. They made him bigger, tougher, more powerful than he'd ever been.

Anna rolled her eyes and drank, her gaze mocking. "Let them talk. In the end, they'll think you can fly." Klos slammed his fist on the table and yelled, "Let them! Let them! We're legends, bastard!" Peter remained silent, but his gaze rested heavily on Hannes—as if silently asking: *And what if they believe it and test you?*

But Hannes just grinned. Wide, bloody, full of teeth.

"Legends don't starve," he murmured. "Legends devour the world."

And in the background, a drunk was already singing a song about him – wrong, dirty, but loud.

Klos drank faster than the jugs came, and each sip made him louder. Soon he was standing on the benches, the chain around his neck, swaying like a ridiculous king.

"Do you hear it?" he roared, his voice dripping with schnapps. "They're talking about Hannes, always Hannes! But who's laughing at the guards? Who's beating the merchants? Who's dancing with the chain until their heads explode? Me! Klos, the Rat King!"

The crowd laughed, some clapped, others shook their heads. A child in the corner shouted, "Klos the drunk!" – and the laughter grew even louder.

Klos staggered, screaming, "I want fame! I want them to sing my name louder than Hannes's!" He lifted the chain as if it were a crown and laughed until he vomited. Beer splashed across the table, and the crowd roared.

Anna watched, her lips thin. "At most, you'll end up in a song, Klos—and they'll sing it laughingly when you're dead." Peter remained silent, his eyes dark. He didn't need words; his gaze alone was like a judgment: *Fame is not made for you.*

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, watched Klos dance, drool, and roar. "Dream, dog," he murmured. "Fame isn't a cup. It's a rope. And it's not hanging for you."

But there was a truth in Klos' madness: the hunger for fame had infected the whole gang – even if only one of them truly wanted to satisfy it.

As Klos lay drunk in his own vomit and the crowd was still laughing, Anna leaned forward. Her knife glinted in the candlelight, but she didn't use it. Her words were sharper.

"Listen, Hannes," she hissed softly, so only he could hear. "Your name is growing. In every dive, in every market, even the children whisper it. But fame isn't bread. It doesn't fill you—it empties you. It only draws you closer to the rope."

Hannes grinned, puffing on his pipe, the smoke curling around his face like nooses. "So? So what? I'd rather die loudly than quietly."

Anna shook her head, her eyes dark. "Dying loudly is still dying. A king in song is still just a pile of bones."

For a moment, there was silence between them, as heavy as lead. Even the howling of Klos, the cursing of the peasants, the giggling of the prostitutes seemed far away. Only Hannes' grin and Anna's cold voice filled the room.

"Fame will eat you," she murmured. "And it will eat us all along with it."

Hannes leaned back and laughed hoarsely. "Then let them eat us. But let them chew for a long time."

Anna looked at him, long and impassive. There was no mockery in her gaze anymore—only this cold knowledge: Fame was worse than hunger. Because you could satisfy hunger. Fame never could.

Peter sat in the shade, his cup half full, his fists heavy on the table. He said nothing, as always. But his silence wasn't emptiness—it was a weight.

He looked at Hannes, saw Klos in the dirt, saw Anna with the knife in her hand. And in his gaze lay everything that words could have expressed.

Fame makes you great, Hannes, he seemed to say. But it also makes you visible. And people who are visible are easier to hit.

He saw how the peasants laughed, how the prostitutes whispered, how the name "Schinderhannes" echoed through the tavern like a song. And he knew: the louder they sang, the closer the gallows drew.

Hannes grinned, absorbing their gaze like schnapps. Klos drooled, dreaming of his own song. Anna observed, mocked, warned.

And Peter? He remained silent. But his eyes burned. It wasn't hatred, it wasn't fear—it was this quiet premonition that fame was nothing more than a knife slowly cutting deeper.

He raised the cup, drank, and set it down hard. Not a word. Just a look at Hannes—a look that said: *I see you. I know where this is going.*

And Hannes grinned back, as if he wanted to devour that very look.

The tavern erupted, voices echoed, cups clinked. Hannes suddenly stood up, his coat open, his scar like a red flash on his face. His gun was at his belt, his knife on the table—but this time his weapon was his voice.

"You laugh, you whisper, you sing my name," he cried, his voice cutting. "Schinderhannes, the bastard, the robber, the devil of Mainz! And you think I'm just a shadow who'll end up dangling from the gallows someday."

The crowd quieted. A few prostitutes still giggled, but most stopped.

Hannes spread his arms, his grin wide, his gaping teeth black. "I'll tell you something: I want more. I don't want to be filled with bread, not with liquor, not with women. I want to be filled with glory. I want you to scream my name long after I'm dead. For the crows to caw it, for the children to play it, for the gallows itself to whisper my name when it eats another bastard."

A murmur went through the tavern. Some laughed, some remained silent, someone banged on the table.

"Immortal!" Hannes roared, his eyes black. "That's what I want to be. No farmer, no dog, no executioner can take that away. I want to be your song, your curse, your nightmare. Forever!"

Klos yelled, half-puking, half-laughing. Anna looked at him coldly, her fingers on the knife. Peter remained silent, but his gaze was as heavy as the gallows itself.

And Hannes? He laughed. Loudly, harshly, until it sounded more like a cough than joy.

The tavern erupted again, with laughter, screams, and singing. Peasants slapped their thighs, prostitutes shrieked, and a fiddler began to play a discordant tune that already bore his name.

Klos slurred, "A song! A song for us!" and fell backward into the dirt. Anna snorted, staring at Hannes, her eyes so sharp they could cut. Peter remained silent, but his fists rested heavily on the table—as if he knew that every word just spoken was a weight none of them could bear.

And Hannes? Hannes stood in the center, his hands outstretched, as if he dominated the entire tavern. His grin was broad, but something dark flickered in his eyes.

He heard the yelling, the jeering, the off-key singing—and deep down, he knew: This wasn't glory. It was a rope woven from words, songs, and laughter. The louder they sang, the tighter it tightened.

He grinned even wider, spat into the fire, and muttered, "Then they should twist the rope nice and tight. I want to hear what it sounds like when it breaks."

Above the tavern the crows screeched as if they had already sounded the final note.

Law of the jungle and curses

The tavern was packed like a pig before battle. Peasants with red faces, hands like shovels, prostitutes with torn clothes and voices like rusty nails, crooks with eyes that lied more than their lips. Smoke, sweat, the smell of beer was everywhere.

A fiddler fiddled with his strings, playing some song no one wanted to hear because the voices were louder. Curses rattled through the room like dice on the tables: "Son of a bitch!" - "Bastard!" - "Shitty woman!" Every sentence a blow, even before a fist had been thrown.

Klos tipped his mug, half of it spilling. "Shitty beer!" he roared, "I'd rather drink dog piss!" People laughed, some mockingly, some nervously. Anna sat in the shadows, the knife at her thigh, her eyes cold. "Everything stinks here," she murmured. "Even the laughter." Peter stood, as always, tall, silent, arms crossed. A tower in chaos, ready to collapse at any moment.

And Hannes? He grinned. His scar glowed in the candlelight, the gap between his teeth black. He absorbed the yelling, the cursing, the crackling in the air like a wolf smelling blood.

He knew: All that was missing was a spark. And then the law of the jungle would prevail—loudly, brutally, definitively.

It started at the next table. A farmer, as big as an ox, with hands as wide as shovels, stared over at Hannes. His tongue was already slack from the beer, but his voice dripped with venom.

"There he sits," he slurred, "the bastard from Hunsrück. The great Schinderhannes. Looks more like a mangy dog than a king."

His companion laughed and spat into the straw. "Dog? More like a pig. Let him root around until the rope catches him."

The laughter was raw, sharp, too loud. Klos jumped up, mug in hand, beer dripping from his beard. "Shut up, peasant! Before I rip your tongue out and stick it up your asshole!"

The bar was in a frenzy: voices, laughter, banging on the tables. The farmer rose, swaying, but firmly enough to look Hannes directly at him. "Well, bastard? Does your dog bark for you, or do you bite yourself?"

The air fell silent. Anna tensed her fingers on the knife, Peter audibly gritted his teeth.

Hannes grinned broadly, his scar burning. "I don't need a dog," he said quietly but sharply. "I bite myself."

And then the first fist flew.

The farmer's fist, heavy as a hammer, crashed directly into Hannes' jaw. His head jerked to the side, blood spurting from his lip onto the table. For a moment there was silence – then Hannes laughed, deep, rusty, full of teeth.

His own fist struck back. Fast, hard, direct. The farmer staggered, crashed over a stool, and beer spilled across the floor. Immediately, the commotion erupted.

A jug flew through the air, shattering against the wall. Chairs tipped over, screams rang out. Hands grabbed fists, throats, anything within reach.

Klos jumped into the middle, swinging the chain, and hit someone in the face, then a table, which shattered. "DANCE, YOU PIGS!" he roared, his laughter louder than his screams.

Anna ducked under a blow, her knife flashed briefly, and a man's arm was slashed before he realized he'd been hit. Her curse was louder than the victim's scream.

Peter advanced like a battering ram. He grabbed two men at once and slammed them against the wall, rattling the boards. One fist to the left, one to the right—two bodies slumped to the ground as if they'd never been standing.

And Hannes? He stood up again, blood in his mouth, his grin black. "That's it," he wheezed, grabbing a chair handle and slamming it into someone's face. "That's our law. No judges, no priests—just fists and curses!"

The dive bar was in a frenzy, every blow a judgment, every curse a death sentence in installments.

Klos was a berserker. No brains, just booze, sweat, and a chain that hissed through the air like an angry demon.

He staggered, spitting blood and beer, but his arms flailed in circles as if he were about to tear down the entire dive. The chain slammed into a man's skull—a crack, then a scream, then silence. Another tried to grab him, but Klos laughed, yanked the guy to the ground, and continued beating until his teeth rolled across the floorboards.

"I AM THE KING!" he roared, his face contorted, drooling, drunk. "THE KING OF THE RATS!"

The crowd retreated, but Klos knew no bounds. He hit walls, tables, anyone who came near. Beer splashed, blood mingled with foam, curses with laughter.

Anna hissed from the corner: "You'll kill us all, you drunken pig!" "Then I'll laugh!" he roared, swinging the chain again.

Peter briefly reached for him, trying to hold him back, but Klos tore himself away, his eyes glazed over, his movements insane. He was no longer a man; he was a raging beast, fed on alcohol and hatred.

And Hannes? Hannes saw it and grinned. "Leave him alone," he muttered. "Every king needs his fool."

But deep down, he knew: Fools in a frenzy make more enemies than friends. And Klos's intoxication was a noose that was getting tighter and tighter.

While Klos shrieked and the chain flew through the air, Anna was quiet—deadly quiet. No screaming, no swaying, just a knife in her hand and words that cut harder than steel.

A man grabbed her arm, yelled, "Come here, whore!" – and in the same breath, his wrist was slashed. Blood spurted across the table, he screamed, and Anna laughed coldly. "Call me that again and I'll cut out your tongue."

She moved among the bodies like a cat. Anyone who came too close received not only a blade, but also a curse. "Dirty dog!" - "Die, peasant!" - "The rope awaits you all!" Her voice was venomous, her eyes fiery.

A whore giggling in the corner had the rest of her wine poured in her face. "Laugh at yourself, bitch," Anna hissed.

The men shrank back, not only from her knife, but from her voice. She was smaller than most, but her words made her great—a witch in the tavern, wielding blood as ink and curses as a quill.

Klos raged, Peter hit, Hannes grinned – but Anna spat venom. And in the chaos, her venom was the only thing that maintained order: cold, precise, unforgettable.

While Klos raged and Anna cursed, Peter remained silent. But whenever he moved, the entire dive shook.

A man charged him, axe in hand, bellowing like an ox. Peter didn't back down. He grabbed the man by the throat, squeezed until the bellow turned into a wheeze, and hurled him across the table, shattering the boards.

Two others jumped at the same time. Peter simply raised his arms, blocked the blows as if they were children's, and slammed his fists down. A jaw cracked, a ribcage cracked, and the men lay still.

He didn't speak a word. No curse, no roar, just his breathing—heavy, loud, like the snorting of a bull. His fists were speech enough.

The crowd retreated wherever Peter stood. He was a tower, a battering ram, a force of nature that knew no bounds. Every blow was a judgment, every crash a proof: There was no law here except his fist.

Anna grinned briefly when she saw him. "Our tower won't fall," she murmured. Klos roared, drooled, and laughed. "Peter strikes like death itself!"

And Hannes? Hannes watched him, his grin thin and sinister. *If Peter falls at some point, he thought, the whole gang falls.*

And the fire in the room grew hotter, as if the walls themselves were afraid of its blows.

The dive was a pile of rubble. Beer and blood ran across the floorboards, tables lay in splinters, chairs lay like bones in the dirt. Men whimpered, women screamed, one gasped his last breath.

Klos lay gasping, the chain still in his fist, drooling with laughter. Anna wiped her knife on a corpse's skirt, her lips thin, her eyes cold. Peter stood in the middle of the room, breathing heavily but unfazed, as if he himself were the law that had just been passed.

And Hannes? Hannes stood on the table, his grin bloody, his gun loosely in his hand. He looked out over the chaos, the screams, the broken glass—and he laughed.

"That is our right," he roared. "Fist and curse! No king, no priest, no executioner has more say than we do!"

The crowd cowered, no one objected. But in the silence following his laughter, something else was heard: the cawing of the crows outside, already waiting.

Anna looked at him coldly. "Fist law always ends with a rope, Hannes." Peter remained silent, but his look confirmed it. Even Klos stopped laughing and stared into space, as if he could already see the rope.

And deep down, Hannes knew: every curse they uttered was just a test run. The last word wouldn't be his—it would be the gallows.

The giggle of the dead

It began quietly. A giggle, little more than a scratch in the ear, as the wind blew through the alleys. Hannes turned around, gun loosely in his hand, but no one was there. Only shadows, only the breath of the night.

He continued walking, his boots in the dirt, the fire in his belly. There again – laughter, this time brighter, sharper. Children's laughter, mingled with women's voices, men's shouts. It came from everywhere, from the walls, from the pavement, from the cracks between the stones.

"Bastard..." it whispered. "Gallows meat... King without a crown..." Then that giggle again, shrill, harsh, like nails on glass.

Hannes stopped, breathing heavily. The scar on his cheek burned as if invisible fingers had touched it. His grin was thin but brittle. "Show yourselves," he growled. "Come out while you can still laugh."

But no one came. Only the giggles, which grew louder and swirled around him until he clenched his fist and drew the knife.

Anna stepped out of the shadows, her hair disheveled, her eyes cold. "Who are you talking to, Hannes?" He looked at her, the knife still in his hand, his lips bloody from grinding his teeth. "The dead," he murmured. "And they're laughing louder than we are."

The giggles continued to echo, invisible, unstoppable. And Hannes knew: the night no longer belonged to him.

The next night, Hannes dreamed—or was he awake? He didn't know. Everything was dark, everything was night. And there they were: the children of Mainz.

No longer with round cheeks and dirt on their faces. No. Their eyes were hollow, black, their mouths wide open—full of stones. They laughed, shrill, piercing, and every throw was a blow to his ribs, to his head, to his chest.

"Bastard!" they cried. "Gallows meat!" Every stone a word, every laugh a rope.

Hannes ducked, raised his arms, but it was no use. They came from everywhere. One, barely ten years old, climbed onto his chest and spat a stone directly in his face. The laughter echoed, endless, cutting through him like glass.

He jumped up, drenched in sweat, the knife in his fist. Next to him lay Klos, drooling, snoring, half-choked in his own vomit. Anna sat in the shadows, her eyes fixed on him. "Again?" she asked coldly.

Hannes wiped away the sweat, his hands shaking, but the grin returned, thin and broken. "They're still throwing."

Anna laughed softly, harshly. "Maybe you should finally meet me."

But when he closed his eyes, he heard it again. The giggling. Children's voices laughing as they slowly buried him.

The night afterward came with the stench of old perfume. Hannes lay in the straw, half awake, half drunk, and suddenly the room was full. Whores, dozens

upon dozens, their clothes torn, their eyes black as holes. They stood around him, giggling, laughing, spitting.

"Well, bastard?" they whispered, their voices a chorus. "We're still dancing. Even when we're long ago lying in the dirt." Their teeth gleamed in the gloom, sharp as knives. They reached for him, not with hands, but with fingers that looked like rat claws.

Between them stood men he had betrayed—one with his throat slit, one with broken fingers, one he had left in the dirt. They grinned as if they had finally found what they were missing: his face, his trembling.

The laughter wasn't loud. It was sharp, dry, mocking. It ate through his ribs, through his stomach, until he felt his breath squeezing away.

"You are no longer alive," he growled, but his voice was weak. "And you have lived too long," shrieked a wench, and the others giggled in unison.

He jumped up, drenched in sweat, his hand on the knife handle. Beside him was Anna, her eyes half-closed, but awake. She looked at him, silently, without mockery this time. Only this brief, cold knowledge: He saw things she didn't—but she believed him.

Hannes wiped his face and laughed hoarsely. "The dead love me," he murmured. "They won't leave me alone."

And outside, behind the barns, the crows answered with a hoarse caw – as if they were part of the choir.

Anna wasn't stupid. She saw Hannes twitching in his sleep, waking up drenched in sweat, his fingers searching for the knife before he was even fully awake. She saw the madness in his eyes, the laughter that came when there was nothing to laugh about.

"The dead laugh, huh?" she hissed one morning as he stared into the fire with glazed eyes. "Good for you, Hannes. At least someone's having fun."

He grinned, bloody, his gaping teeth black. "They're laughing at you too, Anna. At your knife, at your cold face. They're laughing at all of us."

She nodded slowly, her eyes narrowed. "Maybe. But you know what the difference is? I don't hear them. I sleep. I drink. I kill. But you—you let them talk to you. You're already dancing with them."

Hannes' smile froze briefly, but he forced it back. "And what if it does? Maybe it's better to dance with dead people. At least they don't miss their feet."

Anna snorted and spat into the straw. "You're going crazy, bastard. And if you fall, you won't fall alone. You'll drag us down with you. Your laughter, your glory, your damned giggles—that's the rope we're all hanging by."

For a moment there was silence. Only the scratching of rats in the straw, the snorting of Klos, who was sleeping like a pig.

And then Hannes laughed. Hard, sharp, almost like the dead themselves.

Anna looked at him – and for a split second, there was fear in her eyes. Not of the gallows. Of him.

It was on one of these nights that Klos, intoxicated, suddenly jumped up. His eyes glazed over, his chain half-slipped from his neck, he staggered through the straw like a maniac.

"Do you hear it?!" he yelled, spitting out the remains of his liquor. "They're laughing! Ha! The dead are laughing with me!"

He threw his head back and burst out laughing—shrill, hoarse, so loud that the rats fled from the corners. It didn't sound like joy. It sounded like a dog choking while barking.

Anna hissed, "Shut up, Klos, you lunatic." But he didn't listen. He giggled, giggling higher and higher, and then he started imitating the voices. "Bastard! Gallows meat! Hahaha! King without a crown!"

The laughter echoed through the barn, a grotesque echo to Hannes' own demons.

Hannes stared at him, his grin frozen, his scar burning. For a moment, he didn't know: Was Klos just drunk? Or was he really hearing the same thing?

Peter stood in the shadows, silent, but his hands clenched into fists. Even he sensed something was wrong.

Klos finally collapsed into the straw, panting, laughing, and drooling. "They like us, Hannes," he slurred. "The dead like us. They're laughing their heads off—and we're laughing too."

Hannes didn't laugh. Not this time.

The giggles of the dead were no longer just in his head. Now they were everywhere.

Peter sat like a rock, his shoulders broad, his breathing heavy. Laughter echoed around him—first Hannes', then Klos', then the echo of voices no one heard but them. But he remained silent, his brow dark, his eyes deep.

He didn't hear the dead. No giggles, no whispers. But he felt them. The air was heavy, cold, thicker than fog. It was as if every breath forced a piece of grave soil into his lungs.

His hands rested on his knees, and his knuckles cracked as he clenched them. Not with anger—with knowledge. Peter had no ear for voices, but his body knew death like an animal knows a storm.

Anna looked at him out of the corner of her eye, knife in hand, lips tight. She knew Peter didn't hear anything. But he believed Hannes. He even believed Klos. And that made the silence even harder.

Hannes grinned crookedly, his gap-toothed teeth black. "Say something, Peter," he whispered. "Tell me you hear her too." But Peter remained silent. His look alone was answer enough: *I don't hear anything. But I know they're here.*

The fire crackled, rats rustled in the straw. And amidst all this remained the silence of the tower—the heaviest sound of all.

Night lay like a shroud over the barn. Klos was drooling in the straw, laughing, half-conscious, but his throat still emitted that insane giggle. Anna sat awake, the knife in her lap, her eyes hard as glass. Peter stood against the wall, motionless, his fists heavy, as if fending off an invisible enemy.

And Hannes? Hannes lay on his back, knife in hand, scar burning, eyes wide open. He heard it – the laughter that never ended. Sometimes bright like children, sometimes deep like graves, sometimes sharp like prostitutes in a dive bar.

"They're laughing at me," he muttered. "Every step, every word. The dead laugh louder than the living."

Anna looked at him coldly. "Then get used to it. They won't stop."

Hannes grinned, twisted, his teeth red. "Let them. I'll laugh with them. Until the gallows silence them all."

But deep down, he knew: The gallows wouldn't silence anything. The giggles would go with him, through the rope, through the jolt, into the darkness.

And outside, somewhere above the fields, the crows fluttered – as if they were already on their way to complete the chorus.

Stolen kisses, lost souls

The night smelled of cheap perfume, cold smoke, and damp hay. Prostitutes crowded the dives like cats in the heat, their voices a mixture of laughter, curses, and false whispers.

Hannes and his gang stumbled in like a pack of wolves. Coins clinked on the counter, and immediately arms flew around necks, lips on cheeks, hands under shirts.

Klos fell first, as always. He roared, laughed, and let two women drag him onto the benches, drooling like a dog smelling meat for the first time. Peter stood at the edge, tall and silent, but even his gaze lingered on the women who brushed past him as if they were fire.

Anna sat in the corner, knife on the table, eyes cold. She watched as the men choked on skin, on giggles, on lust that reeked more of payment than intimacy.

And Hannes? He absorbed it all. Hands everywhere, lips on his neck, voices whispering "King" in his ear as if it were a curse. He grinned, bit, pulled, kissed, but none of it was tenderness. It was hunger. Not for love—for possession.

The night of the prostitutes began like a celebration. But beneath every laughter lay the howling of crows.

She smelled of sweat, cheap rose water, and old wine. Her lips were soft, but the kiss Hannes gave her wasn't a kiss—it was a robbery.

He grabbed her chin, pulled her toward him, and pressed his mouth to hers until she gasped. No promise, no warmth, only hunger, greed, violence. He didn't kiss, he took.

The prostitute giggled at first, but her laughter was stifled when his hand gripped her hair, hard and rough. "Schinderhannes," she whispered, her voice thin, "you're not a man, you're a rope."

He grinned, his gaping teeth black, his scar red. "Exactly," he growled, "and you're the neck I'm going to take." Then he bit her lip until he tasted blood—sweet, salty, real.

In the background, the others laughed, roared, and groaned. Klos drooled between two women, Peter stood like a shadow, and Anna stared, her eyes cold, the knife in her hand.

Hannes let go of the prostitute, his grin wide and bloody. "A kiss," he said, "is worth more stolen than given."

The woman wiped the blood from her mouth, her eyes dark. "Then keep stealing, bastard. But don't forget – thieves always end up on the gallows."

And for a moment, it was quiet. Only the breathing, the rustling, the distant giggles.

But Hannes laughed. Roughly, hoarsely, until it sounded like a cough.

Anna sat in the shadows, the knife on the table, her fingers steady, her eyes sharper than any blade. She didn't speak a word, but she saw. She saw Hannes' hands on the prostitute, his teeth in her lip, the blood glistening on his chin.

She didn't flinch. No scream, no anger. Just that small, cold twitch around her lips—a smile so sharp it could have cut.

As Hannes wiped his mouth, grinned, and asked for another pitcher, Anna leaned forward, her voice barely louder than the flickering candle. "Every kiss from you is poison, Hannes. You steal him, but he steals you back."

He laughed, harshly, with blood between his teeth. "Poison makes you alive." "No," she hissed, "poison slowly kills you."

The prostitute next to him stepped back, clicked her tongue mockingly, and grabbed the coins he'd thrown on the table. To her, it was just trade. To Anna, it was war.

Klos roared in the background, Peter remained silent, but his eyes rested heavily on the two of them.

Anna leaned back, the knife still in her hand. She knew: Hannes didn't steal kisses. He stole souls. And someday he would steal hers too—or she would steal his.

And the knife would decide whose soul would end up lying in the dirt.

Klos staggered among the women like a fat, drunken dog. He grabbed breasts, hair, anything he could get his hands on. But as greedy as his hands were, his gaze was empty, desperate.

"Love me," he slurred, his tongue heavy, his eyes glassy. "Love me, just a little." The prostitute next to him laughed and threw wine in his face. "You pay extra for that."

He laughed back, a hoarse, whining laugh, and grabbed harder, as if he could force affection. But all he got was ridicule and blows. One of the women broke free and slapped him so hard he staggered. The crowd roared, laughed, and cheered for the ridiculous dog who couldn't even buy love.

Klos wiped the blood from his lip and grinned crookedly. "Just laugh! I'll drink you all under the table. Then you'll love me!" And he gulped down the next mug until he puked.

Anna watched, her eyes cold, and murmured, "Pathetic." Peter remained silent, but his gaze was hard—pity wasn't a word for him. And Hannes? Hannes grinned broadly, bit into a piece of bread, and immediately spat it out. "Klos," he cried, "you won't get any love. At most, you'll get the rope. And that fits better around your neck than any woman."

Klos laughed, drooling, desperate, and fell back into the straw. A dog who was looking for love – and found only fleas.

Peter stood at the edge of the room, tall, immobile, his shoulders like a wall. The prostitutes glanced at him, giggling, enticing, but he didn't react. He drank, slowly, steadily, as always.

But Anna saw it. She saw how his gaze lingered on them, longer than he intended. How his fists clenched, not to strike, but to hold. How his breathing deepened when they laughed.

Peter was silent. He was always silent. But something burned in his eyes—a hunger he never showed. Not a hunger for blood, not a hunger for fame. For closeness.

A prostitute approached him, stroked his arm, and laughed. "The big guy is silent. But when he talks, it's in bed, huh?" Peter recoiled as if she had hit him. His gaze was dark, his chest heaved, but no words came.

Hannes grinned and mocked, "Peter, the tower—too big for a kiss, huh? If you hold a woman, you'll break her in two." The prostitutes laughed, Klos roared from the dirt. Anna remained silent, but her gaze was sharp, full of knowledge.

Peter looked at Hannes, silent, his fists clenched. For a moment, he seemed about to say something. But he remained silent. As always.

Only his eyes betrayed that he was burning. A fire without flame. And that made him more dangerous than all the screams of the others.

It began with a scream. A prostitute shrieked because Klos had grabbed her too roughly, and suddenly three men stood there—suitors, peasants, half-drunk, but armed with fists and knives.

"Leave the women alone, you pigs!" one yelled, his face red with anger.

Hannes grinned, wiping his mouth, still covered in blood from the stolen kiss. "Women belong to no one," he growled, "except the one who pays for them. And we paid."

The first blow fell. A farmer rammed his fist into Klos's face – and Klos laughed, slobbering blood and beer, and grabbed his chain. "NOW DANCE!" he yelled, and the iron hissed through the room.

Anna jumped up, the knife flashing, slicing open one of their arms, spurting blood across the table. "Fucking heroes," she snarled. "You're worse than us."

Peter grabbed the third, lifted him up like a head of cattle, and threw him against the wall, making the boards crack. Not a word, just his breath, heavy as a hammer.

The dive was in a frenzy. Tables were tipping, glasses were shattering, women were screaming. And Hannes? Hannes was standing in the middle of it all, grinning broadly, gun in hand.

He didn't aim. He shot. A bang, smoke, a body slumped. The perfume of the prostitutes mingled with the stench of gunpowder, the sweet scent of skin with the iron-hard stench of blood.

"This is what love smells like," he laughed. "This is what it tastes like. Expensive."

The whores screamed, the men fell, and the crows outside fluttered as if they had already smelled the prize.

The dive smelled of blood, smoke, and rosewater. The prostitutes no longer screamed; they sat huddled in the corner, their faces smeared, their eyes filled with hatred. The peasants lay on the ground, one gasping for breath, two silent.

Klos lay laughing in the dirt, the chain across his chest, drooling, half dead from drunkenness. Anna wiped her knife on the hem of her skirt, her eyes cold and full of venom. Peter stood, tall, silent, blood on his hands, his chest heaving.

And Hannes? Hannes stood in the center, his gun still smoking, his grin wide. He saw the women, the men, the dead, and he knew: no kiss he had ever stolen had given him more than this. Blood. Screams. Fear.

But deep inside, he felt it – every kiss was just a piece of his soul that he was stealing. And the souls were no longer the women's. They were their own. Klos's soul, Anna's, Peter's, his own – all long since sold into the dirt.

Anna looked at him, her voice quiet and cold. "Stolen kisses don't make love. They only make corpses."

Hannes grinned, but his gaze was blank. "Then the crows love us."

And outside, somewhere in the darkness, they croaked – as if they had already agreed.

Smoke, rain and the growling of dogs

The sky hung low like a rotten sack. Rain had been lashing down for hours, heavy and cold, as if it were trying to tear flesh from bone. Every step in the mud was a curse, every breath smoke from steaming bodies.

The fire they had lit in a hollow had long since gone out, only thin wisps of smoke still crept across the ground. Smoke that betrayed more than it warmed. Smoke that said like a flag: *Here they are. Get them.*

Klos cursed, slipped, fell into the mud, and got back up, his face filthy, the chain dragging like a rope. "Fucking rain!" he roared. "Fucking heavens! Even God is pissing on us!" Anna laughed coldly, the knife at her hip, dripping wet, her hair like dark snakes. "Maybe he just wants to clean us up, Klos. But all the rain in the world won't be enough for you." Peter trudged on without a word, tall as a shadow, every step a blow to the ground. Even he staggered, the water running off his shoulders like a rock.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, the rain running over his scar, dripping from his teeth as he laughed. "Let the sky piss. Let it drown us. We're still here. And we're even dancing in the rain."

But deep in the fog, behind the crackling, lay another sound. A growl. Quiet. Harsh. Not from the sky. From the ground.

The dogs were already waiting.

A new sound mingled with the rain and wind. At first, it was muffled and distant, little more than a tremor in the air. Then, more clearly, a bark, harsh, greedy, full of hunger.

The dogs.

Hannes stopped, his hand on the knife, his grin broad but hard. "Do you hear it?" he asked. "Death is barking. He has teeth. And he wants to eat us."

Klos staggered, beating his chest with his fist. "They'll come! I'll bite back! I'll eat the bastard dog!" But his voice trembled, and his gaze darted nervously into the shadows. Anna spat into the mud. "Fucking creatures. They always find you. Even in the rain, even in the smoke. Dogs are worse than humans—they can smell fear." Peter remained silent, but his shoulders tensed, and he turned his head like a wolf testing the storm. He heard more than just the barking. He felt the rhythm of footsteps behind them—men, guards, with iron and rope.

The growl came closer. A deep, hateful roar tore through the forest, and immediately three, four, five throats answered. The entire forest vibrated with it.

The rain rushed, the smoke crept, and beneath it all lay this growling.

Hannes laughed, sharp and cold. "They're barking because they know we're alive. Dead people don't smell so nice."

And then he gripped the knife tighter, his eyes glowing like coals.

The rain had long since eroded Klos's body. His boots were filled with water, and he was dragging the chain behind him, every step heavy as lead. His face was pale, his eyes red, and his breathing was labored.

He stumbled, fell into the wet straw on the ground, and slapped his hands in the mud as if he could claw his way into it. "I... can't go on," he wheezed, blood in his saliva. "Let them get me. Damn dogs, damn rain, damn everything."

Anna stepped next to him, cold, the knife at her hip. "Stand up, you pig. Otherwise, I'll leave you here right now—then the dogs will eat you, and we'll save ourselves the rope." Klos raised his head, his lips trembling, but he grinned bloodily. "Maybe... maybe I love dogs. At least they're honest."

Peter wordlessly grabbed him by the collar and yanked him up as if he were a sack of dirt. He threw him over his shoulder and trudged on, his weight barely more than a stone. But his brow was dark, heavy—even the tower swayed in the rain.

Hannes walked alongside, laughing softly and harshly. "You see, Klos? Even in the dirt, you're too heavy for us. But you're not dying today. Today you're going to keep dancing—whether you want to or not."

The growling came closer, the barking louder, like drums in the darkness. Klos hung on Peter's shoulder, panting, half-dead—and the only thing keeping him alive was that the dogs were eating faster than the rain.

The rain slapped her face as if the sky itself had decided to drown her. Drops like blows, cold and endless. The ground was nothing but mud, which sucked at her boots with every step like an open hand that wouldn't let go.

Anna trudged on, knife at her side, her hair heavy with water. Suddenly she stopped, looked up at the black ceiling, and screamed so loudly that even the dogs fell silent for a heartbeat.

"Come on, piss us some more, you drunk up there! Is that all you can do? Rain, mud, and dogs?! Send lightning down, right here in my face! Or are you too cowardly, God?"

Her voice tore through the night, harsh, mocking, furious. Every sound a blow to the sky itself.

Klos hung panting on Peter's shoulder, but he laughed bloodily, drooling. "Yes, Anna! Curse him! Maybe he'll fall drunk and break his neck!" Peter remained silent, trudging on, his gaze downward, heavy, as if he were trying to carry the earth on his shoulders alone.

But Hannes grinned, water dripping from his scar. "God doesn't hear, Anna," he cried hoarsely. "But the gallows does. And the gallows laughs at every curse."

A clap of thunder rolled, deep and hollow, as if the heavens themselves had answered. And immediately afterward, the dogs barked again, louder, closer, more eagerly.

Anna spat into the rain, defiant, defiant to the end. "Then let them get us, all of us. But I won't go down on my knees."

Peter trudged ahead, tall as a bulwark that even the rain couldn't break. Every step was a deep, heavy, unwavering thud into the wet earth. The rain ran off his shoulders like a stone, but his face remained hard and impassive.

Behind him, Klos hung like a wet sack, half-conscious, gasping, the weight of a dying man. Anna ran beside him, the knife at her hip, mocking and cursing. Hannes grinned, water dripping from his scar, his teeth gleaming white in the darkness.

But everything weighed on Peter. The rain, the mud, the dogs at his back, the weight of Klos on his shoulders—and more than that: the gang itself. He was both a shield and a tower. Everyone knew that if he fell, they all fell.

A growl echoed through the forest, closer, more brutal. A shadow scurried between the trees. The dogs. Peter stopped, his breathing heavy, his fists like stones. For a moment, he seemed to want to bear everything—the storm, the hunt, death.

Hannes grinned crookedly. "If they get us, Tower—they'll eat you first." Peter just looked at him. Not a word. But in his gaze there was something like defiance, like a promise: *Then let them. But until then, none of you eat the dirt.*

The rain drummed, the dogs barked, and for a heartbeat, Peter seemed bigger than the forest itself.

The rain poured down, heavy, endless, as if it wanted to drown the world. The barking was getting closer, the growling was almost at our heels. Anyone else would have remained silent, prayed, cursed. But Hannes? Hannes laughed.

He stopped and turned around, his scar red from the rain, his teeth flashing. He spat into the darkness as if mocking the entire forest. "Come on, you dogs! Sniff me! Taste me! I'm here, you bastards!"

His voice cut through the rain and wind, loud, sharp, almost like a gunshot. Anna snarled, "Shut up, Hannes! They'll find us twice as fast!" But he just grinned, broadly, defiantly. "They'll find us anyway. But I want them to know who they're chasing. Not a shadow, not a rabbit. Me. Schinderhannes."

He ripped the knife from his belt, letting it flash in the slanting light breaking through the clouds. "Come! I dance with dogs too. I dance until they scream!"

Klos babbled over Peter's shoulder, half-conscious: "Dance, bastard... dance..." and wheezed into the wet. Peter was silent, but his eyes said enough – Hannes' defiance was both strength and madness.

And so he trudged on, grinning, laughing, while the dogs barked ever louder, coming ever closer.

The rain hit his face like a whip. But Hannes laughed back.

The forest was nothing but darkness and water. Smoke hung heavy between the trees, rain fell like stones from the sky, and in between the barking—louder, closer, hungrier.

The gang trudged through the mud, heavy, wet, and exhausted. Klos hung over Peter's shoulder like a sack of stones, gasping, drooling, half dead. Anna spat into the rain, her knife always at the ready, her eyes sharp. Peter trudged on, undeterred, but every step was harder than the last.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, tears running into his eyes, the scar burning. But deep down, he knew: rain doesn't erase traces. It makes them visible. Every print of their boots became deeper, clearer, more distinct. A signpost for the dogs, for the men, for death.

He stopped, looked back into the darkness, heard the barking, the growling, the pounding of boots. "They're coming," he murmured. "They're coming, and this time they won't go away empty-handed."

Anna looked at him, her face cold. "Then we hope they're full before the rope grabs us." Klos wheezed, laughed weakly. "They'll eat me first... I taste of schnapps." Peter remained silent. But his breathing was heavy, and there was certainty in his silence.

And Hannes knew: The rain was just the beginning. The dogs would find them. The rope was already braided.

Crows screeched above them—and this time it didn't sound like mockery. It sounded like hunger.

The Thirst for Blood

The rain had drained them, the mud had made their bones heavy. The dogs were still barking in the distance, but worse was the hunger. No bread, no meat, not a drop of liquor—only emptiness in their stomachs, a hole that grew larger with every step.

Klos staggered, dragging the chain, his eyes glassy. "I'll eat anything," he panted. "Dog, rat, human, I don't care. I want to sink my teeth into flesh." Anna mocked, but her voice was harsh. "Shut up, Klos. Your stomach is so empty you can hear your wheezing." Peter trudged silently, but his gaze was hard, his fists twitching. Even he, the always silent tower, looked as if he could punch the air at any moment, just to fill the hole in his chest.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, but it was a different grin—narrower, sharper. He felt the hole in his stomach, the hole in his head, the hole in his soul. Hunger that didn't want food, but blood.

They reached the village in the dark, a few miserable huts, lanterns flickering dimly, and smoke from chimneys that smelled of soup.

Hannes stopped, his teeth flashing, his scar glowing red in the firelight. "There," he growled. "Our meal."

The others looked at him. No contradiction. Only the hunger that made everyone equal.

And somewhere in the huts, behind thin walls, the farmers were still asleep. They didn't know that hunger was already knocking at their doors.

The village slept, but hunger never sleeps. Hannes led her through the alleys like a shadow, his gun loose, his knife steady. The rain still dripped from the roofs, the wind howled, but more quietly than her footsteps.

A door was ajar. A miserable stable, inside filled with the smell of milk, hay, and sweat. A farmer lay curled up on straw, beside him a woman as thin as a rat.

Hannes entered without sneaking. The farmer jumped, about to say something, but the knife was quicker. A cut across the throat – no word, just a gasp, then blood. Lots of blood, warm, spurting, steaming in the cold room.

Klos laughed, jumped forward, dipped his fingers into the red liquid, and licked them like a child stealing sugar. "Sweet," he roared. "Better than schnapps!" The woman shrieked and jumped back, but Anna was already there. Her hand grabbed her by the hair, pressed the knife to her cheek. "Quiet," she hissed, "or I'll slice you."

Peter stood in the doorway, tall, motionless, the shadow of an executioner.

And Hannes? He stood over the still-twitching body, his grin wide and bloody. He knelt down, dipped his hand into the puddle, and sniffed it. "That's it," he whispered. "It warms more than fire."

The first blood had been shed. There was no more hunger for bread. From now on, the hunger was greater – and he craved more.

Klos knelt beside the dead farmer, his chain half buried in the straw, his face contorted with greed. He dipped his hands into the warm puddle, slurped the blood, and let it run down his beard. It dripped onto his shirt, onto the ground, and he laughed as if he'd found the best wine in the world.

"Schnaps!" he roared, his face wet, his tongue red. "Better than schnapps! Warmer! Lively!"

Anna grimaced, but she let him. "You eat like a dog, Klos. A dog that's about to go rabid." Klos looked at her, his eyes glassy, his teeth bloody. "Rabies? Screw it! When I bite, I bite to the bone!"

Peter stood silent, but even he took a step back. His gaze was heavy, dark—even he feared what knelt before him.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, bloody, his scar red. "Drink, dog," he muttered. "Drink until you burst. Maybe then the crows will finally laugh at you."

Klos threw his head back, laughing, blood spurting from his lips. He was no longer human. He was an animal, drinking life itself, greedily, without restraint.

And in that moment, they all knew: It was no longer hunger that drove him. It was intoxication. A thirst that could never be quenched.

Anna held the woman in her grip, the knife against her cheek, so close that a drop of blood trickled before she even closed it. Her eyes were fixed, black, ice-cold.

"Don't scream," she whispered. "Scream—and I'll open you like a sack."

The woman trembled, tears mingling with rain and dirt, but Anna saw none of it. She wasn't cruel out of lust, but out of clarity. Every cut was a score, every threat a tool.

Hannes saw her and grinned. "You do it cleaner than I do, Anna." She spat on the floor without looking at him. "You're bathing in blood. I only cut it out when necessary."

But even in her harshness, something was different. Her hand didn't tremble, her blade was steady—but her lips curled as if she were tasting the metallic flavor of the air, as if she, too, were intoxicated by blood.

Klos babbled in the background, his lips smeared red. Peter stood silent, his chest heaving.

Anna pressed the knife deeper, one more drop, and whispered coldly: "We are all animals. Some bark, some laugh, some are silent. I cut."

The woman fainted, but Anna held the knife to her throat for a moment longer, as if she really wanted to complete the cut. Then she let go.

Her eyes were hard. But in that hardness lay a hunger she didn't admit to herself.

At first, Peter just stood in the doorway, tall and silent, the farmer's blood on the floorboards before him. But then another man, a son perhaps, came with a pitchfork, barefoot, his eyes full of fear and anger.

Peter grabbed him, without words. One hand on his throat, the other on his fork—and then there was a crash of wood, bone, and breath. A scream, short, muffled, strangled.

He didn't stop. The boy hung lifeless in his grip, but Peter continued to punch him, fist after fist, until his face was nothing but a mass, unrecognizable, red, dripping. Each blow louder, harder, angrier.

Anna looked at him, her eyes wide. Even Klos, drooling in blood, paused, his laughter faltering. Hannes grinned, but it was a different kind of grin—a thin, dark, knowing expression.

"Tower," he murmured. "The silent tower is crashing."

Peter was panting, blood running down his arms and dripping from his fists. His gaze was empty, deep, as if he had lost himself.

He dropped the body, a dull thud in the straw, blood spurting. Then he stood still again, like a rock, as if nothing had happened.

But the image remained in the gang's eyes. Not the dog Klos, not the executioner Hannes, not the cold Anna – but Peter, the tower, who shed more blood in a single night than words in his entire life.

And they all knew: The tower was swaying. And if it fell, they would all be buried beneath it.

Hannes stood in the middle of the hut, blood on his hands, the stench of iron in his nose. The dead man was still twitching on the ground, the woman lay unconscious beside him, Klos was drooling in the red, Anna was breathing heavily, Peter was silent—and Hannes laughed.

He laughed like someone who had finally found what he was looking for. Not gold, not bread, not liquor—blood.

He knelt beside the farmer, dipped his fingers into the puddle, rubbed them over his scar, and let the red run into his skin like a crown. "See?" he roared. "That's it! No king wears gold—only blood. That's the only crown that remains."

Anna snorted coldly, but her eyes sparkled. Klos hooted hoarsely, splashing in the blood like a child in puddles. Peter breathed heavily, his silence heavier than any scream.

Hannes stood up, knife raised, dripping. "They're already calling me a bastard, a thief, a gallows meat. Let them! I'm more. I'm the one who drinks when everyone else dies of thirst. I'm the one who laughs when blood is the last wine!"

His voice cut through the room, his grin was insane, his teeth red.

And for a moment, everyone realized: Hannes was no longer a robber, no longer a man. He was hunger with skin.

And hunger has no tomorrow.

The hut was silent, except for the dripping. Blood running from the tables, dripping from fists, seeping into the floor. Klos wheezed, grinned bloodily, and drooled like a dog that had overeaten. Anna sat in the shadows, the knife still wet, her eyes sharp but deeper, darker than usual. Peter stood breathing heavily, his fists still red, his gaze blank, as if staring through walls.

And Hannes? Hannes stood in the middle, his face smeared, his scar glistening with the blood he'd applied to himself like a seal. His grin was broad, but there was something in his eyes that even he no longer fully understood—hunger, yes. But hunger without end.

He licked his lips, tasted the iron, the salt, the life. It was no longer an intoxication. It was an addiction. And he knew, they all knew: Once blood, always blood.

Anna spoke softly, almost in a whisper: "We're lost." Peter was silent, but his silence was one of agreement. Klos was still laughing, half mad, half dead.

And outside, in the rain, the dogs barked again. Louder. Closer.

Hannes grinned, his eyes black. "Let them come. We're thirsty."

But deep down, he knew: No amount of blood in the world would ever be enough. Thirst was greater than he was—and it would drive him to the gallows.

Whores, executioners, hypocrites

The brothel stank of old perfume, sweat, cheap wine, and tears long since dried. Candles flickered in crooked chandeliers, the women's laughter was shrill, practiced, as fake as the colorful fabrics that barely covered their skin.

Hannes entered like a king, but the queens here had their own thrones: the beds. The women knew him; some grinned, others pursed their lips. They knew what a bastard he was—but coins spoke louder than morals.

An older prostitute with a raspy voice leaned toward him. "You know, Hannes," she whispered, "the priests talk about heaven and hell. But we whores know both—and both cost extra."

He laughed, his gaping teeth black, his grin wide. "Then you preach more honestly than the church." "More honestly?" She laughed dryly. "We do what we say. We sell. The church only sells lies."

Anna sat in the corner, her eyes cold, the knife at her thigh. She saw Hannes pouring himself into the words, absorbing the whispers like liquor. Klos drooled, grinned, and grabbed the nearest woman to push his head off. Peter stood, tall, immobile, his shoulders like beams between the colorful cloths.

The whores giggled, whispered, and cursed. But there was more truth in their voices than in any market or pulpit.

And Hannes knew: It wasn't just women who sold bodies speaking here. It was priestesses of filth speaking here. And their altar was more honest than any churchyard.

In the market square, right next to the pigsty and the well, stood the gallows. Black, silent, a scaffold made of beams that exuded more fear than an entire army. And beneath it: the executioner.

He wasn't a demon, not a grimace—he was a merchant. A man with a belly, with sweaty hands, with eyes that paid more attention to the bag on his hip than to the ropes on the beam.

Hannes grinned and stepped closer, his scar glowing. "So you're the dog that kicks our legs when we're dangling?" The executioner shrugged, chewing on a piece of bread. "Dog? Call me a businessman. Every rope costs money. Every tug brings coins. To me, a gallows is nothing more than a market stall."

Klos roared and slobbered: "Then give me a rope to take with me! I want to practice!" The executioner laughed hoarsely and slapped him on the shoulder. "Pay enough—I'll hang you too, dog."

Anna snarled, her eyes narrowed. "You don't kill. You collect. Others kill themselves." The executioner nodded, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "Exactly. You do the work. I collect the coins."

Peter stood silently by, but his expression was dark. A man who traded in killing—that was worse than any knife.

And Hannes? He laughed, loudly and harshly. "Then let's make a bet, businessman. If the rope catches me, will it break sooner, or will you get paid twice as much?"

The executioner grinned, his teeth rotten. "I always collect double. The rope never breaks."

The church smelled of cold wax, mold, and hypocrisy. The pews were filled with peasants kneeling more out of fear than faith, caps in hand, heads bowed. At the front stood the priest, fat, with a gold cross on his chest that gleamed more than his eyes.

"Do not sin!" he roared from the pulpit, his voice high as a barker. "Stay away from thieves, whores, and murderers! The Lord sees all!"

Hannes stood in the shadows, grinning broadly, his scar red. He whispered so quietly that only Anna heard: "If his master sees everything, then he also sees the bag full of coins that the saint hides at the back of the confessional."

And indeed – when the mass was over, they saw the priest disappear. Into the sacristy, where he whispered with a merchant. Gold exchanged hands. A piece of land, a debt, a deal. All under the cross.

Anna spat into the dust of the church floor. "Holy dog." Klos slurred, "He eats more coins than I eat liquor." Peter remained silent, but his gaze was heavy and dark. Even he could see that the words carried less weight in the church than the sound of clinking gold.

Hannes grinned broadly, his teeth black. "There's someone preaching against sin who's deeper into it than we are. The only difference is – he has a cross, I have a knife."

And somewhere in the darkness, a giggle echoed. Whether from God or the devil – it didn't matter. It was the same.

Klos was drunk, the chain beating against his chest as he staggered through the streets. The brothel, the executioner, the church—he had seen it all, heard it all, and suddenly he burst into a hoarse laugh that silenced even the dogs.

"You talk about sin!" he roared, spitting blood and beer. "But you're all the same! The whores sell skin, the executioner sells ropes, the priest sells God—and us?" He paused, drooled, and grinned broadly. "We sell fear! And fear always fetches the best price!"

Passersby stared at him, shocked and disgusted, but Klos continued to laugh until he started coughing. Then he almost fell over, but caught himself with the chain and slammed it onto the ground, sending sparks flying.

Anna narrowed her eyes. "You talk too much, dog." Klos snorted and shook his head. "No, I'm telling the truth! We're brothers in the dirt, sisters in blood. Saints, whores, executioners, hypocrites—all one and the same! And the spoon is the gallows!"

Peter stood beside him, motionless, his brow heavy, his eyes dark. But Hannes grinned, broad and sinister, his scar gleaming in the lantern light.

"Maybe you're right, Klos," he murmured. "But only one of us drinks the soup warm. The others suffocate in it."

And Klos continued to laugh until it was more of a wheeze than a laugh.

Anna had remained silent while Klos roared, while Hannes grinned, while even the executioner joked about ropes. But there was something else in her eyes—not mockery, not laughter. Something harsher.

She stood at the edge of the market, knife at her belt, her gaze fixed on the church, then the brothel, then the gallows. Three places, three masks—and each stank of the same filth.

"We pretend we're different," she murmured, coldly, quietly. "But we're no different than those people. The priest preaches and steals. The whore smiles and sells. The executioner kills and collects. And us?" She looked at Hannes, her eyes sharp as a blade. "We take. We cut. We laugh. The only difference is that no one tries to whitewash us."

Hannes grinned broadly. "So we're honest bastards." "Honestly?" Anna laughed dryly, a sound without joy. "We're mirrors. Everything we hate, we carry ourselves. Only we shout it louder."

Klos drooled, yelling, "I don't see myself in the mirror, Anna. I only see a rope!" and burst out laughing again. Peter stood silent, his arms crossed, his gaze heavy.

But Anna continued to stare, knife in hand. "Perhaps," she murmured, "we're the only ones who still realize that we've long been hypocrites. Just without the mask."

And there was more poison in that sentence than in all her previous curses.

Peter said nothing. He never said anything when the others were spitting, screaming, or laughing. But his eyes were alert, and they saw everything.

He saw the whores in the brothel smiling with lips that were long dead. He saw the executioner counting coins while oiling ropes. He saw the priest kissing the cross while hiding the gold beneath his coat.

And he saw the gang. Klos drooling in the dirt, Anna with cold words, Hannes with a bloody grin.

There was no judgment, no mockery in his gaze. Only this quiet knowledge: that the difference between the executioner, the whore, the hypocrite, and them lay not in their craft, but only in their price.

His fists clenched, his knuckles white, his veins bulging. Not out of anger—out of understanding. For Peter knew: the law was a lie, morality a trade, sin merely a name.

And while the others talked, laughed, and cursed, he remained silent. But his silence weighed more heavily than any words.

Hannes grinned as if he'd noticed. "You know it too, Tower, don't you? We're all the same." Peter looked at him, silent, unmoving. And in that look lay an answer louder than any roar: *Yes. All the same. Only hunger separates us.*

And then he trudged on, tall, heavy, a shadow that knew more than all the others put together.

The streets were empty, the rain had subsided, and yet the stench of brothel, gallows, and incense still hung in the air like a curse. Three places, three masks—and none purer than the other.

Klos babbled, drooled, and grinned: "All bastards, hahaha! All the same dogs!" Then he fell into the dirt, choking on laughter. Anna walked beside Hannes, knife at the ready, her eyes narrowed. She knew: There was no longer a boundary between them and the others—just a different costume. Peter trudged along in silence, but his shoulders seemed heavier than before, as if he were carrying not only the gang, but the entire realization that there was no "right" or "wrong" anymore—only masks that would eventually fall off.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned. But his grin was darker, sharper. He had seen something in the eyes of the whores, the executioner, the priest: not enemies. Mirrors. Each of them was like him—bastards in the business of survival.

He spat in the dirt and laughed harshly. "It's not the good guys who hunt us. It's only other bastards who keep their masks on better. But masks tear. And when they fall, all that's left is blood."

Crows fluttered above them. They looked down at the city, the brothel, the church, the gallows—and cawed as if they had long known that it was all just a game.

A king without a crown

The dive was packed, the smoke hung low, beer dripped from the tables like sweat from brows. Farmers roared, prostitutes giggled, and in the middle of it all stood Hannes, as if he had the world in his grasp.

"The King of the Hunsrück!" yelled a farmer with more schnapps in his blood than sense. He slammed the mug on the table, sending foam flying. "A king of dirt, blood, and iron!" "A king without a crown!" cried a prostitute, but she laughed and pushed the mug toward Hannes.

Klos yelled, tipped the rest into his mouth, and staggered across the benches. "Long live the bastard! Long live our king!" He spat beer, slobbered, and banged the chain against the beam, sending sparks flying. Anna sat at the edge, legs crossed, knife playfully in her hand. Her gaze was mocking, cold. She

wasn't laughing—not like the others. She was watching. Peter stood silent, as always, the shadow of a tower in the dirt. But even he had to watch as the crowd roared, as Hannes's name grew larger than the room.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned broadly, the blood in his teeth long since dried, his scar gleaming in the light. He raised his cup, and the crowd cheered as if a king had raised his hand.

But his crown was just noise, his throne a wobbly table, his kingdom a room full of drunks. And yet, for a moment, he believed it was real.

Klos was already half-lying on the table, his face covered in beer and blood, the chain around his neck like a ridiculous scepter. "Long live the king!" he roared, pulling a prostitute toward him, who pushed him away in disgust. "And long live me, his dog!"

Anna laughed harshly, coldly. "You're a dog, Klos. And the king will only feed you as long as you bark. After that, you're carrion." Klos hissed, tried to jump up, but stumbled, fell back into the beer, and snorted with laughter: "Then I'll eat the crows! Let them eat me first!"

Peter stood by, silent, but his gaze was sharp as a blade. He saw Hannes acting up, Klos drooling, Anna teasing—and in his eyes lay this quiet realization: this wasn't a celebration, it was a rift.

Hannes grinned, raising his cup as if he were truly a ruler. "Be quiet, you dogs. Today you celebrate your king." "King without a crown," Anna hissed back, quietly, but sharply enough for him to hear.

The crowd roared, sang, and roared. But between the laughter lay curses, between the cups, resentment. The crowd celebrated—and tore itself apart at the same time.

And Hannes absorbed it. Because even strife made him greater. A king hunted not only by the world – but also by his own dogs.

Hannes stood on the table, his boots soaked in beer, his grin wide, his scar red as a second crown. The crowd roared, yelling his name, and he raised his hands as if to bless them.

"You call me king," he cried, his voice rough but loud enough to silence even the rats in the rafters. "And you're right! I am your king—not because I have a

crown or a throne. But because I take what I want. Because I'm alive while you're all already half dead!"

A roar of cheers rippled through the dive. Mugs were raised, one fell and broke, and beer splashed onto the floor.

"The priest preaches from heaven," Hannes continued, "the executioner collects money for ropes, the prince lines his pockets. But which of them drinks with you? Which of them fucks your wives, laughs in your bars, beats down the guards when they torture you?" He beat his fist against his chest. "Me! Schinderhannes! Your bastard king!"

Klos roared, drooling, and swung the chain. Anna didn't laugh, but her eyes flashed dangerously. Peter stood motionless, his silence heavier than the cheering.

Hannes spread his arms, pistol in one hand, cup in the other. "My kingdom is dirt, my throne is the table, my crown is blood. And I swear to you: As long as I live, you will live more loudly than all the princes combined!"

The bar erupted, a noise like thunder. And Hannes absorbed it like a king who, for a heartbeat, believed he was truly one.

Later, as the noise of the dive turned into a muffled roar, Hannes stumbled into a back room. Wine still dripped from his lips, blood stuck to his boots, but he was no longer laughing.

An old mirror hung on the wall, blind and cracked. He stepped before it, its grin frozen. The face staring back at him was no king. It was a bastard with a scar, red, swollen eyes, and teeth that looked like a pile of stones in rotten flesh.

He stared for a long moment, the knife held loosely in his hand. "King," he whispered, and the mirror showed only a dog in the dirt. He tapped the blade against his temple and laughed hoarsely. "Crown of blood... throne of lies."

Behind him, someone coughed, a prostitute poking her head through the door. "You're talking to your mirror, Hannes?" He grinned, but his eyes were empty. "A king must sometimes talk to his subjects." She laughed harshly, shook her head, and disappeared again.

He stayed behind. Everyone called him king, but only the mirror spoke the truth: He was nothing but a bastard, with blood adorning his forehead like a crown that could slip at any moment.

And outside, in the noise, they sang his song, while he stared into the glass and saw the face that had long since been hanging on the rope.

Hannes returned to the bar, his grin broad again, his shoulders squared like a ruler. But Anna immediately noticed that his gaze was still fixed on the mirror.

She sat at the table, her knife playfully between her fingers, her eyes cold. When he sat down next to her, she leaned forward, her voice quiet but sharp as glass.

"King?" she hissed. "You are no king, Hannes. You are a temporary bastard. Your kingdom is peasants who drink too much. Your crown is blood that will be washed away tomorrow. Your throne is a table that shakes with every push."

He grinned, but it was a grin that strained, tore. "And yet they scream my name, Anna." She laughed harshly, bitterly. "They scream because they're afraid. Not because you rule. A king without a crown is no king—he's a fool they cheer until the rope replaces him."

Klos roared in the background, slamming his chain on the floor as if he didn't understand the argument. "Long live the bastard!" Peter remained silent, but his gaze was on Hannes—heavy, dark, as if he knew that with every word, Anna was driving the truth deeper into his flesh.

Hannes sucked in air through his teeth, the scar glowing. "Perhaps," he growled, "but better a fool they call out than a dog they forget."

Anna smiled thinly. "Forget one thing, Hannes. Even fools dance on the gallows."

And her gaze cut harder than any knife.

The peasants roared, the prostitutes giggled, the tavern rocked like a ship in a storm. Hannes stood back on the table, his cup raised, his grin wide.

"Our king!" one roared, and the crowd cheered. But in the same breath, another, half-drunk, shouted: "A king without a crown! A king in the dirt!" — and the laughter erupted.

They didn't laugh out of respect, they laughed because they could. They sang his name, but they distorted it, making a mockery of it. "Schinderhannes, King of the Dogs! Schinderhannes, Lord of the Whores!"

Klos roared louder than everyone else, as if he didn't understand the mockery. "Long live the bastard! Long live our dog king!" He slobbered, swung the chain, and almost knocked down a farmer, who jumped aside, laughing.

Anna saw it, her eyes sharp and cold. "They're celebrating you, Hannes," she murmured, "but they're laughing at you louder than they're shouting for you." Peter stood in the shadows, motionless, but his gaze was hard. He understood: jubilation and scorn were one and the same.

But Hannes grinned, his teeth flashing red in the candlelight. "Let them laugh," he growled. "A king laughed at is still a king. A dog spat on remains a dog."

But his gaze flickered – a spark that revealed that the farmers' laughter cut deeper than any knife.

The tavern stank of beer, smoke, and ridicule. The peasants' cheers rose like thunder, but between every laughter lay a sting that cut deeper than any knife.

Klos lay on the floor, drooling, laughing, his chain clinking like a ridiculous crown. Anna sat at the table, the knife on her thigh, her eyes cold—and in her gaze, the sentence had already been pronounced. Peter stood motionless, a shadow that knew more than he said.

And Hannes? Hannes stood on the table, grinning broadly, cup raised, scar red. But something else reflected in his eyes: a knowledge he didn't want to admit.

He heard the songs, the laughter, the cries of "King! Bastard! Gallows meat!" – all in one breath. And he understood: They didn't love him. They needed him. As a joke, as a bogeyman, as a noise in their nights. But no king without a crown remains a king.

He spat into the fire and laughed harshly. "Let them laugh. Laughter doesn't fill a rope. But when it comes, I'll dance like a king."

But deep in his belly, where hunger always resided, he knew: Kings without crowns don't die on thrones. They die on the rope, with mockery as their last song.

And outside, above the rooftops, the crows fluttered as if they had long since left the court to guard the gallows.

The price of betrayal

The barn was cold, the wind cutting through the cracks like a knife. A small fire smoldered in the middle, but it didn't provide any warmth—it was just a red eye scrutinizing them all.

Hannes sat with his back against the wall, his pistol beside him, his grin thin and dangerous. Klos lay in the straw, half-drunk, the chain across his stomach, drooling, but his laughter was quieter than usual—more a tremor than triumph. Anna sharpened her knife on a stone, slowly, viciously, each stroke like an accusation. Peter sat in the shadows, tall, motionless, but his silence was heavier than the howling of the wind.

No one spoke. But the air was full of words, unspoken, sharp as arrows. Everyone knew: the rope was tightening. The dogs were barking somewhere outside, the guards were moving closer, and soon someone would speak. One would sell the others to live for himself.

Anna looked up, her eyes narrowed. "It stinks," she murmured. "Of what?" Hannes growled. "Of fear. Of betrayal."

Klos laughed, choking, but the laughter stuck in his throat. Peter looked into the fire, and the crackling sounded like a judgment.

They were a gang. But they were also a noose that tightened itself.

Anna lowered the stone, the knife glinting dully in the firelight. She turned it slowly in her hand as if it were a coin—but everyone knew: there was no play with her.

"Which of you will speak first?" she asked quietly. No scream, no anger—quiet, like a drop of poison. Klos blinked, drooled, his laughter sounded like hiccups. "I'm always talking, Anna. But no one listens to me." She cut the air with the blade. "Not the babbling, Klos. I mean talking when the rope is beckoning. When the dogs scratch at the door. When a guard leaves a piece of bread."

Her eyes wandered to the shadow where Peter sat. "Or that one. Always silent. Silent is worse than babbling. Silent devours secrets. Silent betrays without a word."

Peter raised his head, his brow dark, but he remained silent. Hannes laughed harshly, his grin broad. "Go ahead and ask, Anna. But don't ask too many questions. If you ask too many questions, you won't want to answer yourself."

She leaned forward, her voice a whisper. "I'm asking because I know one of us has been sold long ago."

The fire crackled, and in the silence that followed, one could hear the dogs barking outside.

Klos rolled around in the straw, the liquor still heavy in his veins, the chain rattling across his chest. He laughed, a wet, hoarse laugh that sounded more like a cough.

"Treason? Hahaha... You think someone's talking?" He wiped his drooling lip, his eyes glassy yet sparkling. "I've already spoken, bastards. In every tavern, every hole. I'm bellowing your name louder than the priests shout their Lord's Prayer!"

Anna jumped up, knife in hand, her voice sharp. "You dog! Your mouth is the rope!" Klos raised his hands and laughed even louder. "So what? Let them come! I'll scream in their faces: Schinderhannes! Anna with the knife! Peter, the silent tower! The whole world should know who we are!"

Hannes's grin was thin, dangerous. "You don't scream. You bark. And a barking dog always attracts the rope." Klos giggled, drooled, and rolled in the dirt. "Then hang me! But first, I'll drink your blood!"

Peter stood there, his fists heavy, his gaze dark, as if he could silence Klos with a single blow. But he did nothing. Not yet.

Klos's laughter filled the barn until it sounded like a screech. And everyone knew: He had already revealed too much without realizing it.

Peter sat in the shadows, tall, motionless, his fists on his knees. He hadn't said a word since Anna had asked the questions. Not a curse, not a laugh, not even a cough. Only his breathing, heavy, steady, like a mill wheel in the dark.

Silence crept into the others' bones. Klos giggled nervously, drooling into the straw. "You see? The tower never talks. And if anyone's sold, it's him. Silent as the grave. Silent as Judas hiding his purse in his sack."

Anna stared at him, cold and sharp. "He sits there like a stone. Not a glance, not a word. He who remains silent thinks. And he who thinks betrays." Peter slowly raised his head, his eyes heavy and dark, but he remained silent.

Hannes grinned, his teeth flashing in the firelight. "You're making the tower a traitor because it keeps its mouth shut?" He laughed harshly. "Maybe he's the only one who hasn't said a word yet. Maybe you're the ones who were sold long ago."

Peter clenched his fists, his knuckles white, his veins bulging. For a moment, it seemed as if he would leap up, tear everything down. But he remained seated. Heavily. Silent.

The silence was louder than any confession. And that's precisely why it felt like guilt.

The fire crackled, sparks rose, and Hannes suddenly stood there, tall, his scar red in the light. His grin was broad, but his eyes were black, hard as iron.

"Enough," he growled. "You want to know who's betraying? Listen to me."

He raised the gun slowly, letting it wander over their faces—Klos drooling, Anna cold, Peter silent. Everyone got a breath of air from the muzzle.

"A traitor will not be caught," he said harshly, "a traitor will be slaughtered. No court, no rope. Only my knife, my bullet, my hand. Whoever of you speaks—will die that very night, before the dogs even sniff."

Klos giggled nervously, coughed, and spat blood into the dirt. "Hahaha... then shoot me right now, Hannes. I've been barking the whole time." Anna smiled narrowly, but her eyes were sharper than a knife. "And if you yourself are the traitor?" Hannes laughed loudly, harshly, like a dog in a storm. "Then at least I'll die laughing. But first, I'll take all of you with me."

Peter didn't move, but his fists twitched, heavy, dangerous.

The fire reflected in Hannes' eyes, and for a moment he seemed like the executioner himself. Except his gallows was always within reach.

After Hannes' threat, not a word was spoken. But the silence wasn't an alliance—it was an abyss. Every look, every gesture was a cut.

Anna sat with her arms crossed, the knife loosely in her hand, her eyes fixed on Hannes. Not fearful—calculated. She didn't grin. She measured him. Klos lay in the straw, his laughter stifled, a giggle that sounded more like a whimper. He pulled the chain tighter around him as if for protection—but it had long since

become his rope. Peter sat like a stone, but the tension in his shoulders spoke louder than words. His silence was no longer calm—it was a threat.

Hannes paced in a circle, his gun loosely in his hand, his grin thin. "See?" he murmured. "Nobody trusts each other. And that's a good thing. Trust is rubbish. Only fear keeps us awake."

Anna hissed, "Or divide us." "Perhaps," he grinned, "but division also makes us stronger. The one who survives is the one who bites first."

Klos giggled nervously, a dog in the dark. Peter looked into the fire as if he could already see the decision in it.

The gang was still together – but everyone was already sitting alone in their own shadow.

The embers in the fire crackled, casting red shadows on the walls that looked like ropes. No one spoke. But everyone knew that words had long since been spoken—unspoken, deep, dangerous.

Klos was still giggling, quietly, hoarsely, like a dog in a dream. "Traitors... all of us... hahaha..." His voice sounded more like madness than mockery. Anna looked into the fire, her fingers playing with the knife handle. In her eyes, the plan was already complete—when the time came, she would stab first. Peter sat like a tower, silent, immobile, but the weight of his fists hung in the air. Even his silence was a threat.

And Hannes? Hannes stood there, his grin thin, his gun held loosely as if it were a crown. But deep within him, he was gnawed by the certainty: betrayal was out of the question.*whether*. Betrayal was just a question*When*.

Outside, the dogs barked. Closer, ever closer. Inside sat four shadows who no longer trusted each other.

And Hannes knew: The rope didn't just come from outside. The rope came from within. And the price of betrayal wouldn't cost coins. It would cost blood.

Escape in the fog

The forest was dead. No stars, no moon, just this white wall creeping slowly between the trunks like foul breath. Fog. Thick, wet, cold. It settled on the skin, in the hair, crept into the bones.

The gang stumbled forward. Their footsteps sounded muffled, swallowed, as if wrapped in cotton wool. The ground was muddy, yesterday's rain still lingering. And now the fog, consuming every direction.

"Shitty milk," Klos gasped, the chain clanking dully, as if even the iron were tired. "I can't see anything. Not even my own face." Anna snorted, pulling the knife closer to her. "I can see your face even without the fog, Klos. And believe me, it won't be any prettier." Peter stomped forward, tall and heavy, as if pushing the fog away with his shoulders. But he, too, seemed smaller, swallowed up by the white wall.

Hannes stopped, grinning, his scar glistening with moisture. "Do you hear it?" he whispered. No answer. Then: a distant bark. A horn. Footsteps.

The fog was no friend. It swallowed not only her, but also time. Every breath became glass to be swallowed. Every sound returned, duplicated, distorted.

And so they ran – blind, hunted, in the middle of a realm that did not belong to them.

The fog rose. And he was hungry.

The fog turned the forest into a labyrinth without walls. Every tree suddenly appeared to be two, three, or even none at all. Every step echoed, as if stepping on unfamiliar soil.

Anna cursed quietly, knife in hand. "Left, right—all the same. We're running in circles like dogs on a leash." Klos stumbled, laughing hoarsely. "Maybe we're already dead and just don't realize it. This is heaven, haha... a heaven made of shit!" Peter remained silent, his eyes narrowed, his fists clenched. He turned his head, listened, but even his hearing was deceived by the fog. Footsteps sounded near, then far. Voices echoed, sometimes their own, sometimes strangers.

Hannes led the way, his gun loosely in his hand, a small grin on his face. "Screw roads," he muttered. "Roads are for people who know where they're going. We only know what they're from."

A horn blared, dully, somewhere in the white. Immediately afterward, a bark, then silence. But the silence was worse—it was oppressive, making one's chest feel tight, as if the fog were trying to suffocate them.

They stumbled on, blind, every step a roll of the dice. Behind them death, before them nothingness.

And nothingness grinned.

Klos panted like a sick horse, dragging his chain, his boots long soaked with mud. The fog clung to him, making him feel heavier, as if he already had the rope around his neck.

"Shit... milk..." he gasped, staggering to the left, then to the right. A branch cracked, he stumbled, almost fell, and slid on his knees into the dirt. As he got back up, they heard the barking—close, too close.

Anna snarled, "Stay on your feet, dog! Those mutts will tear you apart first, and then us!" Klos laughed hoarsely, drooling, his teeth red from the blood he was still licking from his lip. "Let them! Maybe... I'll be their feast... haha!"

But there was no mockery in his voice, just panic. He staggered back, almost stumbling in the direction of the growl. Peter grabbed him by the collar, yanked him forward, and threw him to the ground almost like a sack.

"Run," said Peter – his first word in hours, deep, dull, like a blow.

Hannes grinned, but his eyes were narrowed. "One more stumble, Klos, and I'll leave you. The dogs deserve a laugh, too."

Klos panted, puffed, and staggered. But he ran. Half man, half rope, already more prey than hunter.

And the fog swallowed his wheezing like a promise.

The fog was so thick that even breath looked like smoke. Every step obscured the view, every movement was lost in the white. Anna trudged beside Hannes, the knife tightly gripped in her fist, her teeth bared.

"Fucking fog," she hissed. "Fucking world! You're blinding us, you're paralyzing us—and the dogs are laughing their heads off. Show yourself, you white whore! Eat me if you can!"

Her voice echoed, coming back, distorted, as if the fog itself were giggling. Klos laughed shrilly, staggering. "Haha... he's answering you! The fog is laughing! Maybe he's just a dog who's already going to eat us." Peter trudged silently, his breathing heavy, but even he glanced up briefly, as if Anna's curse had made the air heavier.

Hannes grinned narrowly, his scar glistening wetly. "Keep cursing, Anna. Maybe the fog will think you're more dangerous than the dogs. Then it'll let us go."

She spat into the white wall, the spit instantly disappearing as if it had never existed. "Fucking fog," she hissed again. "You're worse than God. At least he flashed sometimes."

But the white remained. Silent. Suffocating.

And the barking came closer, dull, muffled – as if the dogs were already standing in the middle of the fog.

Peter trudged ahead, his shoulders broad as a shield, his steps heavy as hammers. The fog swallowed everything, but he blazed a trail as if he could crush the white wall with the sheer force of his chest.

Klos staggered again, half-blind, half-drunk, and this time Peter caught him before he fell. He grabbed his arm and pulled him along like a sack of rubble. Not a word, just that iron grip that said more than all the threats.

Anna growled, mocking: "You're not a rook anymore, Peter. You're a mule." He didn't answer, but his shoulders tensed, his fists white, as if he were carrying not just Klos, but the whole gang.

Hannes grinned, the knife loosely in his hand. "Let him drag it. Every king needs a horse." Peter turned his head, his gaze dark and heavy. For a moment, it seemed as if he wanted to simply leave Hannes behind in the fog. But he continued on, step by step, undeterred, the only fixed point in a realm of nothingness.

The fog clung to him, the barking roared behind them, but Peter didn't budge. He was a shield, a battering ram, a beast of burden—and perhaps the only thing separating them from the rope.

But even shields break. And even towers collapse.

The fog was thick as shrouds, and every breath tasted of must. The dogs barked somewhere, muffled, close, like voices from a grave.

Hannes stopped, threw his head back, and laughed. Loud, raw, hoarse. "Come on, you bastards! Come on! Sniff, bite! I'm standing here, in the middle of the white, waiting for you!"

Anna whirled around, her eyes narrowed, her knife clenched. "Are you crazy?! Your mouth will betray us!" "They already know we're here," he yelled back. "Then they should hear me laugh before they tie the rope around my neck!"

Klos drooled, bawling weakly, almost pleadingly: "Laugh louder, Hannes... then they'll find us faster... then they'll eat me first, haha!" Peter stopped, his shoulders heavy, his breathing harsh. He said nothing, but his gaze was dark – as if he knew that Hannes' defiance was taking away their last protection.

Hannes raised his pistol and fired into the white wall. The bang was dull, muffled, but it echoed back tenfold, as if the fog itself were shooting back. Crows fluttered somewhere, dogs howled louder.

He grinned broadly, his teeth red from the last blood. "See? Even the fog is laughing along."

And he trudged on, laughing, as the bonds between fear and madness threatened to fall apart.

The fog was a coffin, and they were the dead, stumbling around inside it. Every step sucked in the mud, every breath was heavy as mud. The whiteness swallowed faces, voices, even the fire in their blood.

Klos stumbled, gasping, half hanging on Peter's arm, more of a burden than a man. Anna cursed, her knife wet steel in her hand. Peter trudged, the tower in the storm, but even his shoulders seemed tired, broken by the weight and silence.

And Hannes? Hannes was still grinning, but his grin was narrower, sharper. He felt it in his gut: the fog wasn't protection. It was a mirror. Every scream, every shot, every curse echoed back, doubled, tripled. The dogs didn't need eyes—the fog itself betrayed them.

He stopped for a moment and listened. The barking was no longer coming from behind him. It was coming from all sides. Like a ring slowly closing in.

"We're in," he murmured, barely audibly. "In the rope."

Anna gave him a hard, cold look, but a spark of fear flickered in her eyes. Peter remained silent, but his fists twitched, as if he knew he would soon have to strike—not to escape, but to die like a tower collapsing.

The fog was silent. Only the panting of dogs and the approaching footsteps could be heard.

And Hannes knew: fleeing wasn't an escape. Fleeing was only a delay.

When the gallows calls

The fog had betrayed them. Footsteps suddenly emerged from the white, hard, heavy, from all sides. Dogs barked, snapped, teeth flashed in the haze. And then came the iron.

Cries rang out: "There they are! Grab the dogs! No escape!" Torches flickered as if the fire itself had surrounded them.

Klos stumbled first, falling into the mud, the chain heavy across his chest. A dog jumped on him, pulled him down, and he screamed—not in anger, but in fear. "Not me! Not me!" Peter raised his fist and struck. The dog howled, but there were already three men there, hooks, ropes, fists. Even the tower shook.

Anna stepped back, knife in hand, and spat in the hunters' faces. "Come on, you bastards, one by one!" But someone grabbed her from behind, slammed her down with the butt of the rifle.

Hannes stood in the center, his pistol raised. He laughed, spat, and fired a shot into the crowd. One fell, but ten followed. He shouted, "I'm Schinderhannes! You need more ropes than you have!" – then a club struck him, hard and black.

When he blinked again, he was kneeling in the mud. Hands were pulling at his arms, ropes were snapping at his wrists. The dogs were barking, the crowd was roaring.

And the fog receded. All that remained was bright daylight—and the cry of the gallows, louder than anything else.

The iron clicked like a mockery. Rings snapped shut, cold metal ensnared wrists, chains rattled. Every blow of the hammer on the bolt sounded like a final nail in the coffin.

Hannes knelt in the mud, two guards pinning him down. One spat in his face, the other pulled the rope tighter until his skin ripped. He grinned anyway, blood between his teeth. "Tighten it up, dogs. Maybe then I'll feel something."

Anna was grabbed by the arms, held by three men as if she were a wild animal. She laughed in their faces, spat in one of them, and screamed, "You can tie them up, but you are the true servants—not us!" But the iron bit deeper, and her laughter was more defiance than victory.

Peter allowed himself to be forced down, wordlessly, his muscles hard as stone. It took four men to do it for him, and even then, he didn't waver. He just looked at them, silent, grim, as if he were a tree falling because time willed it—not because axes were striking it.

Klos whimpered, the iron clanging against his wrists. "Not too tight! Please! I can't breathe!" He squirmed and kicked, but the ropes made him look ridiculous, like a dog on a chain.

And the dogs were still barking as if they knew: the prey was caught.

The shackles clanged – and with every clang the call of the gallows became clearer.

Klos had always laughed, yelled, drunk, and swung his chain like a weapon. But now, with irons on his hands and a rope tied around his back, nothing remained of the dog—just a whimpering bundle of flesh.

"Please!" he wheezed, spitting mud and tears. "Don't hang! Not me! I'll talk, I'll sing you everything! Names, places—just let me go!"

The guards laughed and kicked him into the dirt with their boots. One kicked him in the face, another pulled on the rope until he was panting like a pig. "Just talk, dog," one growled. "But talk or remain silent—the gallows will take you anyway."

Klos sobbed, drooled, screamed. "I don't want to die! I've never lived! I drink, I fuck, I laugh – but I've never... I've never..." His voice broke into a howl, muffled and pitiful.

Anna watched, cold, her lips thin. "Now he's showing his true colors. Not a dog. Just a worm." Peter remained silent, but his gaze was dark, heavy, full of shame—not for himself, but for the one crawling beside him.

And Hannes? Hannes grinned, blood on his scar, his teeth red. "See, Klos? Your mouth was big enough to betray the world. But everyone stays quiet around the rope."

Klos continued to howl until his voice broke. The chain hung slack, and the last vestige of pride was smothered in the mud.

Three men held her as if they were afraid she might bite even with her hands bound. Anna stood upright, her face hard as stone in the moonlight, her hair wet and black, her lips bloody but firm.

A guard whispered, "Spit again, whore, and I'll knock your teeth out." Anna smiled coldly, tilted her head, and spat directly in his face. The man raised his fist, but Hannes laughed loudly, sharply. "Go on, dog! Hit her! Maybe you'd rather hang her than me."

The punch didn't come; the men only pulled her harder. But Anna stood like a queen without a court, mocking, firm. "You're cowardly pigs. Four against one woman. You call yourselves hunters, I call you curs."

Klos whimpered on the floor, Peter remained silent, Hannes grinned. But Anna laughed—not hoarse, not broken, but short, clear, like a blade in the dark.

"Hang me," she hissed. "But I'll die with my eyes open. You'll kneel in the dirt before I do."

The guards cursed and pushed her on, but no one looked her directly in the eyes.

And in that moment, in the middle of the ropes, in the middle of the mud, Anna seemed taller than all those leading her.

Peter knelt in the mud, his hands firmly in irons, ropes around his shoulders. Four men held him as if he were a wild animal, but he didn't move. His breathing was deep, steady, heavy like mill wheels.

He said nothing. No curse, no scream, no whimpering like Klos, no mockery like Anna. Just silence.

The guards pulled on the ropes, cursed, and tried to push him to the ground, but he remained kneeling, like a tower that even storms and thunder couldn't completely break. One struck him on the head with the butt of a rifle. He bled, but he just looked at the man—silent, unmoving, with eyes that spoke more than a thousand words.

Anna gave him a quick look, cold but full of respect. Even Hannes's grin narrowed for a heartbeat when he saw the silent tower.

Klos was still whimpering, dirty and pleading. But Peter's silence was louder than any crying. It wasn't resignation. It was defiance. A man who knew the end was coming—but he wouldn't give it his voice.

And that made him more dangerous than all the knives they had taken from him.

The gallows called. And Peter remained silent.

They drove him through the village, ropes on his wrists, irons on his ankles. Crowds thronged the houses: farmers, prostitutes, children, priests, even the old dogs, barking as if they knew whose flesh would soon hang.

Hannes didn't stumble. He walked, chin up, grinning broadly, as if it were all just a damn play, and he was the leading man.

"Look at me!" he roared, his voice hoarse but loud. "You peasants, you whores, you hypocrites—here goes your king!" The crowd roared, spat, laughed, and cursed. One threw a stone, hitting Hannes on the shoulder. He just laughed, spitting blood into the dust. "More! Throw more! I've eaten worse!"

Anna hissed, Klos whimpered, Peter remained silent. But Hannes spoke for everyone. He grinned, his scar red, his teeth black.

"You call me robber, murderer, gallows meat—and you're right! But you know what? I lived! I fucked, drank, laughed, bled! More than you could pray in a hundred years! I die today, yes—but I die louder than you've ever lived!"

The crowd screamed, a wave of hatred and greed. But behind the noise lay something else: fascination.

And Hannes absorbed it. King once again. King without a crown, but with a rope.

The market was crowded, the air thick with breath, sweat, and mockery. Above everything loomed the gallows, black, hard, immobile—a tree without roots, grown solely to carry men.

The shackles rattled, the dogs barked, the crowd roared. Klos was still howling, a pitiful mixture of cursing and begging. Anna spat, laughed harshly, but her eyes betrayed the abyss. Peter stood like a tower, silent, but broken by time, not by the ropes.

And Hannes? Hannes looked up. The rope hung there, limp, like a tongue just waiting to bite into flesh. For the first time, his grin flickered. Only briefly. Then he pulled it wide again, but deep down he knew: This wasn't a game anymore. No fog, no escape, no intoxication.

The gallows called. Not loudly, not with words—but with the creaking of the wood in the wind, with the silence of the sun breaking through the clouds.

Hannes felt it like a blow: This time it wasn't him laughing. This time it was the rope.

And the laughter was louder than anything he had ever screamed.

Schinderhannes dances for the last time

The bells rang, dully, heavy, as if they themselves were driving nails into the sky. The market square was crowded, heads close together, children on the men's shoulders, women with scarves over their mouths—no one wanted to miss the bastard's hanging.

Hannes was brought forward, ropes around his wrists, irons on his ankles. Two guards on his left, two on his right, the executioner in front with the rope over his arm. The crowd cheered, spat, and threw stones that sank into the mud.

But he walked, chin up, scar red in the light, grinning broadly. Every step clanged, heavy, but he trudged as if he were walking toward a throne.

"There he goes!" someone yelled. "The dog from the Hunsrück!" "The king in the dirt!" a woman shrieked.

Hannes laughed, spitting blood onto the cobblestones. "Yes, laugh, you dogs! Without me, you'd just be in the field today! I'll bring you more joy in death than you ever had in life!"

Klos was dragged beside him, whimpering, the chain dragging, he stumbled, fell into the straw, and crawled on. Anna walked upright, cursing, spitting back, her eyes sharp. Peter trudged silently, heavily, like a tower that was already beginning to crumble.

But Hannes—Hannes absorbed the screams, the hatred, the mockery, the laughter. King once more. Lord once more.

And above it all loomed the gallows. Black. Waiting.

Klos stumbled, stumbled, and fell into the pavement like a wet sack. The chain rattled hollowly, the iron cut into his skin, and his mouth drooled mud, tears, and snot.

"Please! Don't! I don't want to!" he cried, gasping and panting. "I'll talk! I'll tell you everything! Names, places, every hiding place! Just not the rope!"

The crowd roared, laughed, and spat at him. A farmer shouted, "Hang him first, he stinks enough already!" A child threw an apple, which shattered on his forehead.

The guards dragged him up, but he collapsed again, his legs giving way, his tongue slurring. "Mercy... mercy..."

Anna looked at him, cold and sharp. "See, Klos? Your mouth was always big. Now it's just dirt." Peter looked away, his silence heavier than any stone.

Hannes laughed, loudly, piercingly, despite his restraints. "Klos, my dog—you barked until your throat burst. Now you're howling like a worm. Dance ahead, maybe your rope will teach us what it looks like."

The guards dragged Klos to the gallows. He thrashed, howled, and kicked – but the rope waited, indifferent and cold.

And the crowd cheered as if they had already seen a king fall - but it was only a dog that finally no longer had a mouth.

Anna was dragged between two guards, the ropes tightly around her wrists, but her back remained straight, her head held high. The crowd roars, shouts "Whore!" after her, and throws mud, stones, and old bones.

She laughed. A harsh, cutting laugh that was louder than her mockery. "Whore, yes! But I've known more men than you women ever have!" she cried, and spat right in the face of a woman who shrank back, screaming.

The children laughed, the men roared, the women cursed. But Anna stood there, her eyes sharp as blades, her face covered in dirt, but not full of shame.

"You'll hang me, yes!" she cried. "But don't forget: I lived while you only crawled. I took what I wanted—and you just begged, ate, and followed!"

A guard poked her with the butt of his rifle; she staggered, but she didn't fall. Instead, she laughed again, hard, cold, as if the rope were crowning her, not breaking her.

Hannes saw her and grinned crookedly. "Anna, even in chains, you're sharper than any knife." She gave him a quick, narrow look, but there was something in her eyes that even he understood: pride, defiance, and the cry that she wouldn't bow down even to the gallows.

The crowd spat, the guards dragged her on. But Anna walked as if she were wearing not ropes, but a crown of poison.

Peter was led by four men, two on ropes, two with spears in their ribs. But he didn't stumble. He trudged, slowly, heavily, like a tree that has been felled, but which still decides for itself where to fall.

The crowd fell silent for a moment as he passed. No jeers, no taunts—just that quiet murmur when people realize that even a dead man seems bigger than they are.

A farmer spat in his face. Peter didn't wipe it away. He simply looked at the man, silently, hard, and the spitting dog lowered his gaze, pushing himself back into the crowd.

Anna gave him a quick glance—and even she, in her defiance, gave a barely perceptible nod. A tower fell, but it fell straight. Klos was still whimpering in the distance, Hannes grinned with bloody teeth. But Peter remained silent.

His silence was heavier than all the cries of the crowd. It was not a plea, not pride, not rebellion. It was only silence that said: *I have lived. I am falling. There is nothing more.*

And when he saw the gallows, the beam, the rope – he didn't even blink.

The tower fell. But it fell like a tower, not like a dog.

The guards dragged him up the steps, the wood creaking beneath his boots. The rope hung above him, slack but greedy, like a mouth waiting for meat. The crowd roared, a sea of voices, mockery, laughter.

Hannes stopped and turned, his grin wide, his scar red. The sun fell on his face, and he raised his chin as if he were not a prisoner, but a king on his throne.

"Look at me!" he roared, his voice rough but cutting. "You call me dog, robber, gallows meat—and you're right! But I've lived more in my years than you have in your miserable lives!"

Stones flew, one hit him in the chest. He laughed, spat blood, and spread his arms. "I fucked, drank, laughed, bled! I danced with knives, sang with guns, and I was free—freer than any of you standing here gawking like cattle!"

Anna grinned in the rope, Klos cried on the floor, Peter remained silent. But Hannes absorbed everything—the screams, the hatred, even the laughter.

"You'll hang me, yes!" he cried, "but you'll still be whispering my name long after your children are lying in the dirt. Schinderhannes! A king in the dirt, but a king!"

The crowd roared, the bells rang. And for a moment he stood there—larger than the gallows itself.

The executioner stepped forward, rope in hand. No smile, just routine. He placed the noose around Hannes's neck, pulled it tight, and adjusted the knot like a tailor completing his work.

The crowd held its breath, only the barking of a dog could be heard.

Hannes grinned, his teeth red, his scar shining. "Tighten it, you dog," he growled softly at the executioner. "But watch out—the rope won't hold me for long. I dance better than you've ever seen."

The executioner nodded and gave a sign. The bell rang. The beam cracked.

The ground disappeared.

Hannes fell. The rope ripped at his neck, a blow like fire through his entire body. His face contorted, his legs twitched, his body shook, thrashed—a dance, raw, cruel, merciless.

The crowd cheered, screamed, and jeered. "Dance, Hannes, dance!" someone shouted, and the words were drowned out by laughter.

But Hannes was still grinning. Even as he twitched, even with the rope making his eyes bulge, he still had that broad, devilish grin.

His last dance. A dance on a rope.

And he danced it as if he never wanted to leave the stage.

The body still twitched, swinging back and forth like a crooked pendulum. The rope creaked, the wood groaned, and the crowd erupted—a sea of jeers, jeers, and roars.

Klos was already hanging motionless beside him, his tongue sticking out of his mouth, a pathetic dog on a rope. Anna was spitting in the guards' faces, even with her last breath, and Peter stood heavy, silent, a tower finally broken by the rope.

But Hannes... Hannes had that grin on his face. Broad, bloody, mocking. Even dead, he looked as if he were still laughing at them—the crowd, the executioner, God himself.

People screamed, cheered, and called his name—half in mockery, half in fascination. "Schinderhannes! Schinderhannes!" Children giggled, farmers toasted, prostitutes wept and laughed simultaneously.

And in that moment, the truth began: The man was dead. But the story lived. Everyone who looked took a piece with them. The image of the bastard grinning on the rope.

The gallows had claimed him, yes. But he had danced, and the dance would remain.

The crows circled above the square. And they knew: Death hadn't been king here. But myth.

A shadow remains

The market was silent. No more hooting, no more whistling, no more jeering, only the creaking of the wood in the wind. The gallows stood black against the gray sky, empty, the ropes still damp, the ground beneath soaked with mud and blood.

The crowd had left. Only a few guards remained, tired, yawning, their boots deep in the dirt as they loosened the wood, coiling the ropes like old ropes in a yard. One kicked the beam as if to make sure the thing didn't claim another life.

A dog sniffed the ground, found a trace of blood, and licked it until a stone chased him away. The bell in the distance slowly fell silent, its last beat still hanging in the air, heavy, like a heart that no longer wanted to beat.

The air smelled of iron, sweat, and burnt straw. It was the smell that lingered when the people were fed up with death.

And yet: the gallows still stood. Empty, but not silent. It spoke of the one who had danced there. And its shadow continued to creep across the square, over the houses, into people's minds.

The farmers scattered, their boots heavy with mud, their coats damp from the rain. Some were still laughing, yelling, recounting how Hannes had flinched, what his face looked like when the rope grabbed him. One imitated the movement, jerkily, with his tongue sticking out – laughter rippled across the square.

Others walked silently, eyes downcast, hands deep in their pockets. They had seen how someone like them, a man of filth and hunger, dominated the crowd until the very end. They said nothing, but they knew: none of them had that much pride.

The prostitutes returned to their rooms, their lips red, their eyes tired. They whispered, laughed, mocked—but there was a tremor in their voices, as if they could still see the grin in the rope.

The children ran ahead, screaming, jumping, throwing sticks over each other like ropes, playing gallows. "I'm Schinderhannes!" one shouted, climbing a fence. "Then dance!" the others shouted and pulled him down. Laughter, squeals, shrieks.

The bell fell silent, the gallows creaked. And the people went home—satisfied with the spectacle, hungry for the next one.

But everyone took something with them. A picture. A laugh. A shadow.

Even before the sun set, the first mocking songs echoed through the streets. Children's voices, shrill, bright, full of malice and joy.

"Schinderhannes, hangman, dance in the rope as wildly as he can!"

They sang it in a circle, stamped their feet, threw sticks over their shoulders, and hung rags on the fences. One personified the executioner, another the tower Peter, and a wild-haired girl spat out the name "Anna" as if it were a curse.

The farmers laughed, some shook their heads, others nodded seriously. "That's how it begins," one murmured. "A bastard becomes a song."

The children jumped, screamed, and laughed. "Once again, once again!" they cried, and again the song echoed:

"Schinderhannes, dog in a rope, laughs death back in his mouth!"

It was mockery, yes. But also admiration, secret, unspoken. They made fun of him—and they kept him alive.

The bells were silent, the guards yawned, the dogs slept. But the children sang.

And in each rhyme the shadow grew further.

Hardly anyone spoke of Anna. A few prostitutes whispered her name, laughed harshly, and recounted how she had spit while still in the rope. But they were already mixing their stories with lies: sometimes she was said to have

screamed, sometimes pleaded, sometimes laughed. Her image was blurred, like blood washed away by rain.

Peter, the tower—he was mentioned like a stone. "The tall, the mute, he didn't even flinch in the rope," some said. Others barely remembered his face. He had fallen, and towers that fall become earth.

And Klos? He was just a joke. The children imitated him, whining, drooling, and screaming. The peasants laughed: "The dog who howled before the gallows." No hero, no villain—just ridicule.

Only Hannes remained. His name still hung in the air, heavier than the ringing of the bells. They had all died, yes – but only one lived on.

The gang had disintegrated, forgotten. Schinderhannes remained.

The next morning, the market was empty. Only the crows remained, black, heavy, with greedy beaks. They perched on the gallows, fluttering from beam to beam, screeching in the silence.

Straw still lay on the ground, soaked in blood, steaming in the dawn. A piece of cloth, a shoe sole, a broken tooth—that was all that remained of the gang. The crows swooped down, pecked, and carried scraps into the sky.

A prostitute paused briefly, pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders. "Not even the earth wanted her," she murmured. Then she moved on.

The dogs still sniffed around the spot, barked, and chased the crows—but the birds were faster. They carried the rest away, piece by piece, until nothing remained except the creaking of the gallows.

And somewhere, above the rooftops, the cawing mingled with the first song of the day. No prayer, no bell tolling. Only the crows, the heirs of the gallows.

They ate the meat, but left the shadow behind.

The gallows creaked, but the fields still had to be plowed. The farmers returned to the dirt, bent over the clods again, their hands sore, their backs bent.

The princes sat in their castles, counted coins, drank wine, and laughed at the fools out there. The priests climbed their pulpits, preached of sin and punishment, and pocketed the alms. The whores opened their doors, painted their lips, and sold skin for bread.

The gallows had swallowed, but it hadn't changed anything. Hunger remained hunger, rope remained rope, blood remained blood.

Only the songs were new. They whispered in the taverns, they murmured in the forests, and they grinned in the markets—stories of the bastard who grinned, even in a rope.

The world continued on, as dirty, as hungry, as empty as before. Only a shadow had lengthened.

A shadow that passed over the villages with every word, with every song, with every curse.

The sun slanted over the hills, as if tired of watching. The gallows were empty, the crows gone, the square swept—and yet something still hung in the air.

The farmers had their shovels, the children their games, the prostitutes their laughter. But in every voice lay a residue. An echo. "Schinderhannes."

A whisper in the tavern, a mocking song in the field, a sigh in bed when women dreamed of men who took more than they gave. He was dead, yes. But his shadow crept through every village, through every pub, through every prayer.

Anna, Peter, Klos—they faded. Names forgotten by the next winter. But Hannes remained. Not as a king, not as a hero, but as a bastard who grinned even in his rope.

And that is exactly what made him immortal.

For the gallows eats flesh, not memory. And as long as children sang, peasants cursed, princes trembled, and prostitutes laughed, the shadow of Schinderhannes would continue.

A king in the dirt. A dog in a rope. A shadow that never disappeared.

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Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail: admin@perplex.click

Homepage: <https://www.perplex.click>

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