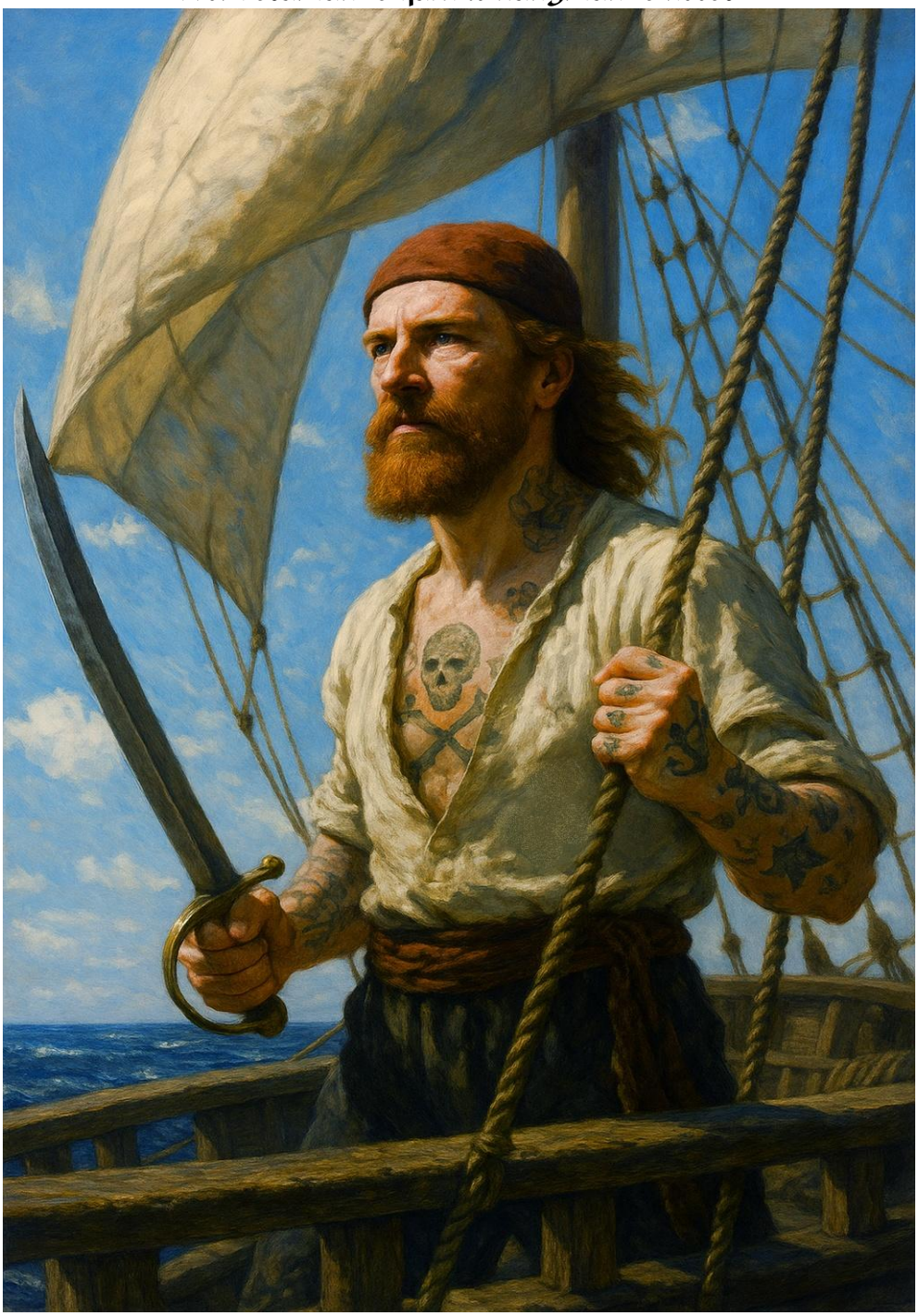
Störtebeker

From seaman' s yarn to hangman' s noose



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Contents

A tough guy

He was a damned bastard with a red beard who stank of fish, sweat, and cheap rum. A guy who would open a barrel of wine for you one moment and slit your throat the next if you so much as looked askance. A man you didn't trust, but followed anyway because he swore louder than God and drank harder than the devil.

Störtebeker. The name felt in my throat like a sip from a bottle full of nails: painful, but warming. He was the last scumbag you wanted next to you in a bar—and exactly the first one you needed in front of you in a battle. Some said he was a freedom fighter, a Robin Hood of the seas. But those were the drunken tales the whores whispered into the sailors' ears before they emptied their pockets. The truth was: he was a thief, a murderer, a drunk. A tough guy.

The sea had spat him out like a piece of wreckage. But instead of sinking, he had learned to surf on the dirt. He stood on the foredeck, legs wide apart, knees slightly bent, as if he wanted to hit the wave himself if it got too high. The sun beat down on his face, and his grin was a crooked, toothy thing, half threat, half promise. In his fist was a knife that had seen blood for too long to be clean. And the wind played with the band around his forehead as if it were a flag declaring its surrender too soon.

"Full sail!" yelled one of the boys from the stern. His voice sounded as if he had salt in his throat. The planks gave an answer, a dry groan that old ships make when they have to pretend they're young again. A man, as thin as a spade-thin herring, hung over the shrouds, laughing. Not because there was anything to laugh about, but because he hadn't died in too long. That makes it strange. The clouds above drifted like dirty handkerchiefs. The sea looked as if it wanted to swallow the entire crew, but it was too lazy to make an effort.

"Another rum!" roared Störtebeker. Someone handed him a cup, and he drank as if it were a sacred duty he'd fulfilled since birth. He wiped the rim of his mouth with the back of his hand, looked at the water bursting at the bow, and spat into it as if he might insult the sea. Perhaps he did. The sea took the spit as it took everything and acted as if it had been his idea.

The helmsman, a scarred hulk with hands like shovels, stood at the helm. His name was Hinnerk, but most people called him Bone Man, not because he was skinny, but because he could twist your neck with two fingers and then continue eating his bread. "What are you hunting, Klaus?" he asked without

turning around. The question came as if it had always been there, just recently raised aloud.

"Anything that's too slow or has too much," said Störtebeker, grinning. "Today, we'll eat."

The men around him made their noises: knives were sharpened, muskets were examined, ropes were coiled and dropped again, and curse words were chewed as if they were chewing tobacco. One whistled a tune that sounded like bad weather. Another prayed, but it sounded as if he were reciting a recipe for pickled herring. Faith on board is like an old jacket: you put it on when it's drafty and take it off when it gets warm.

Before them lay the water in long streets, and at the end of one of these streets, a fat belly of wood and hope pushed across the waves: a merchant ship. Clean varnish, worn sails, that tortured pride of those who believe rules can save them. The banner was Hanseatic League, the smell of spices and damp grain hung in the air from afar. Störtebeker clicked his tongue. "There," he said, pointing with his knife as if it were a conductor's baton. "That's what I call breakfast."

"They have an escort," murmured one of the younger men, his voice no more than a scratch against the wood. Sure enough, a small guard duck lay beside the merchant ship, not large, but fast and new enough to cause trouble. It seemed as alert as a bad dog.

"Then it's time to brush your teeth afterward," said Störtebeker. He blinked. The sun made his eyes narrow, but his gaze remained firm. "Pull over to the right. Take the wind. Stick your tongue out."

Bone Man nodded, and the rudder creaked. The "Bunte Kuh"—as they called their swaying monster, half cog, half joke—carved a curve as elegant as an old blacksmith's dance: not beautiful, but convincing. The sails bulged, the ropes a song of tension and cursing. Wood beneath her feet that still wanted to live. When ships breathe, they do it with their keels, and today hers was panting with pride. Or with fear. At some point, you can no longer tell the difference.

Störtebeker walked along the railing, slowly, like a butcher at a shop window. "Listen!" he called without shouting; his voice had that way of being attentive yet cutting. "No one plays the hero. Heroes hang high, and the crows laugh." A few men chuckled. He continued: "We'll take that fat pig there, cut it open, take what's warm, and leave the rest to the fish. Whoever survives drinks.

Whoever dies, too—but then we'll drink for them." The laughter was short, rough, genuine.

He stopped at a man named Joris. Joris had two teeth that were much too large for his mouth—as if nature had played a bad joke on him during its creation. "You first, Joris," said Störtebeker. "Show them the invitation."

Joris nodded and raised his crossbow. The bolt whirred across the water and lodged in the side of the guard ship. The answer came immediately: a cannon cleared its throat, and a bullet whistled past the mast so close that everyone ducked their heads, even those who swore they'd never played duck. Splinters rained down. One of the boys roared, clutching his hand, from which a splinter blossom sprouted. "Nothing broken," Bone Man growled, "just pride."

"Muskets!" Störtebeker shouted. The men crouched down, rifle butts on their shoulders, eyes slitted. The first volley was messy but loud. Smoke settled over the water like a bad thought. Screams over there, but only small ones. The watchdog was awake, no question.

"Hook clear!" Hinnerk yelled. Two of the bigger boys—men with arms like ropes, only pretending to be human—swung their grappling hooks, and when Störtebeker lowered his hand, they flew.

The clanging of metal against strange wood has a sound you won't forget. It's the sound in which decisions are made. The sound that determines whether you brush your teeth tonight. The ropes taut, the ships kissed each other unpleasantly. A few steps, a few curses, and then the world was close and ugly.

"Forward, you brave sinners!" Störtebeker jumped first. It didn't look like a jump. More like a fight with gravity, which he won because it was inattentive at the moment. His knife was a dark hand in the sun, then red. Men aren't pigs; they're cut differently, but the blood tastes the same everywhere. The first man who stood in his way was surprised to see a beard so close, and then he saw nothing at all. Störtebeker pushed him aside as if he'd moved a board.

The deck planks of the guard ship were clean, neatly oiled, the pride of a guild. After five seconds, they were a mixture of sand and red, and pride was banned from the building. Shots. Someone in the back fell backward and laughed, not knowing he was already dead. There's that kind of laughter that outlives you and stays for a moment. Then it goes quiet.

Störtebeker moved with the stubbornness of a man who never learned to dance and therefore took every step seriously. He blocked with his left hand, stabbed with his right, and his breath came like bellows. One of his opponents, a fat fellow with a face like bread, made the mistake of staring at the knife instead of his eyes. The error was brief. Störtebeker rammed his shoulder with his own body, the man staggered, and then there was only wood and the sound of teeth being given more work than they were meant to do.

"Left!" Joris yelled, and the shout came just in time for Störtebeker to see the saber coming toward him like bad news. He dived low, the saber swept over him, and for a moment he smelled the leather of his opponent's wrist strap. Then his knife was where air had been. His opponent made a noise all men make when they come to terms with reality. After that, the world was one man less.

The guard ship didn't give in. It growled, fought, and bit. But bites are tenderness when hunger is on the other side. Bone Man surfaced next to Störtebeker, a tree trunk the size of a man, and struck. The wood beneath them vibrated, the sea nodded approvingly, as if it knew what justice was.

At some point, someone drummed a bell, that tinny thing that means surrender when the tongue grows tired of saying "enough." Men dropped their weapons, hands went up, eyes sought support and found only sky. The noise died as noise always dies: slowly, stubbornly, reluctantly.

"What a bunch," said Störtebeker, puffing and rubbing the blood from his face. He tasted salt and iron, and he noticed his hands shaking, not from fear, but because the world always dances for a moment after a battle. "Gather what's alive. Tie up what's dead. And fetch me the merchant from across the river."

The merchant was a man of good cloth, who now looked as if he might become rags. "I have rights," he said, and his voice made a sloppy bow before falling over. "I am a man of—"

"Me too," said Störtebeker. "I'm the man who won't throw you overboard today if you're smart. And smart means talking. What's on board? Grain? Cloth? Spices? Money?"

“Everything is legal,” said the merchant, and Störtebeker laughed the way only men laugh, who know that legality is a disease that only the rich get.

"Legal is when I nod," he said. "And today I'm being generous. You live. We take what we like. If you complain, I'll take your tongue as a souvenir." He beckoned to Joris, and Joris came, two teeth gleaming. "Search. Quickly."

The men tore the ship apart like seagulls tearing apart old bread. Crates were ripped open, sacks were heaved, barrels were rolled onto the planks. The sound of wood on wood is pleasant when you're hungry. It promised bread. It promised beer. It promised the feeling of filling your stomach again instead of just your pockets. Bone Man checked the cargo with weighing eyes. He had this talent: He could look at a sack and know if it was lying.

Störtebeker stepped to the railing and looked at his "Bunte Kuh." He didn't love the ship. He didn't love anything. But between him and the crooked-plank lady, there was a kind of understanding that other married couples spend their lives searching for: He carried her into battle, and she carried him out again. Most of the time. "You ugly old woman," he murmured, stroking the wood, which was smoother here than usual. "You were quick today, weren't you?"

"Klaus," Joris said from behind him. "You want to see this." He held a small box, not large, but old. Old as debts. Störtebeker took it and opened it with a patience that didn't suit him. There was no gold inside. Only three seals and a letter that smelled of wax.

"Now, now," said Störtebeker. "Secrets. They taste better than coins." He waved. "Later."

The sun had risen, now higher, exuberant. The sea glittered, and the water pretended to be pretty. The men laughed, full-throated laughter. Rum was passed around, and someone began a ballad that had more swear words than rhymes. The merchant sat slumped, his dignity searching for spare parts somewhere below deck.

"We're heading west," said Knochenmann, who rarely asked for directions, but today he offered one. "The weather's coming, and you shouldn't run from the weather, but rather pretend you're on a date."

"West," Störtebeker nodded. "And if the wind blows us where people with noble noses live, we'll take their noses away. Maybe we need new ones for our boys." He grinned, and this time the grin was tired. Fighting makes you hungry, and hunger is a great artist; he paints best on an empty stomach.

He stood still for a moment. Right at the front, where the wood meets the sky. He looked out. He wasn't thinking anything big. Men like him rarely think big. They think: Today we stand. Tomorrow the world may forget us. Then at least the waves will have a good story when they swallow us down. He raised his cup. "Fair enough," he said quietly, almost politely, as if thanking someone he despised. Then he drank. The rum burned his throat clean. A good burn. It didn't extinguish anything. It only made room.

"Klaus," someone said, "the guard has another guy down there. Captain, I think. Wants to talk."

"Everyone wants to talk when their boat dies," said Störtebeker. "Bring him here."

They brought him in. A man in leather and arrogance, suddenly dressed only in leather. "You're Störtebeker," he said, and his voice wasn't as firm as it would have liked.

"I'm one of those people," said Störtebeker. "And you're one of those people who's about to run out of time." He paused. "Say something clever. A sentence. So your grandchildren can write it down, if they haven't already sold out."

The man looked down, then back up. "I'm doing my duty," he said, and it was as if he had chosen to be the boring hero in a bad story.

"That's not a sentence, that's an alibi," said Störtebeker, nodding, and two of his men pulled the captain aside. No big deal. The sea got its due.

Silence spread, that brief silence after work, in which all the nerves are still laughing. Then the ship faded back into sounds that were less piercing: ropes, wood, voices, wind. Life pushed back, like water into a wound. And Störtebeker stood there and watched as his men stowed the loot and arranged the dead, because even the dead need order if they aren't to stink.

"A tough guy," Bone Man muttered, taking a drag on a pipe that smelled in the distance. "That's what they say. I say: tough isn't enough. You also have to be soft enough to know when to drink."

Störtebeker laughed. "Then drink," he said. "Today was a good day." He looked again at the horizon, which acted as if it were a limit, even though it was only an idea. "And tomorrow will be worse," he added quietly, not knowing why. Perhaps because every good day is a burden to the next. Perhaps because

somewhere, someone had already cast a bullet bearing his name. Names are cheap. Bullets are not. But the math always works out in the end.

He put the knife back, feeling the weight of trust. It was the only thing that never argued. Then he walked across the deck, letting his fingers touch the pins and nails as if they were the faces of old friends. One of the boys looked at him, a gaze full of questions that are never asked. "What are you looking at?" asked Störtebeker. The boy lowered his gaze. "Nothing."

"Right," said Störtebeker. "Nothing is what we rely on. And it sustains us better than anything."

He stopped, raised his hand, and the ship's heart paused briefly, as if it knew a scene was over. The wind shifted slightly, a barely noticeable whim, like a lack of courtesy. "West!" he roared, and this time it was a command that also struck the sun. Sails creaked, ropes sang, the "Bunte Kuh" snorted. She was ready for the world's next mistake.

And if you had asked him back then why he was laughing, he would have said: Because the sea despises anyone who thinks it owes them something. Because life is nothing more than a rocking deck and a lying horizon. And because a man who knows that can still drink.

Drink until the rats flee

The night was no lady. She was a burst sack of shit that someone had dumped in the middle of the dive, and everyone sitting there grinned because they knew they were the ones who stank the most. The air was filled with smoke, cheap rum, sweat, and the sweet stench of unwashed bodies. And somewhere amidst all of this, on a table that had long since lost its dignity, stood Störtebeker, drinking like he was trying to drink the world dry.

The rats had long since given up. The first ones, still cautious, scurried out from under the floorboards, attracted by the smell of stale bread, scraps, and the sticky residue in the cup. But eventually, they realized there was nothing left to gain here except kicks, screams, and falling teeth. They fled, running up the walls, escaping through cracks. And one of the guys yelled: "See, the rats are leaving! We'll drink them out!" And everyone laughed as if heaven had just promised them free beer.

Störtebeker raised his tankard. Half a barrel of rum had already disappeared down his throat, but his gaze was clear, as clear as the knife in his hand when he wanted to slay someone. "Drink until the rats flee!" he roared, and the gang answered in unison, as if it were a prayer. Only here, no one said "Amen," but "One more!"

The innkeeper, a poor wretch with a nose like a crooked branch and fingers glistening from too much hot fat, had long since given up trying to maintain order. He brought barrels, set them down as fast as his legs could carry him, and hoped no one would think he was entertaining. Störtebeker paid—most of the time. But what does "paying" even mean when you can make it clear with a glance that an innkeeper's next mistake could be the last decision of his life?

The men raged. One sang, another puked in his lap. No one took offense; he just laughed and carried on. Bone Man sat in the corner as if he were an altar of flesh. He drank slowly, deeply, with the dignity of a priest, but everyone knew he could strike at any moment if anyone was stupid enough to disturb him. Beside him were two whores, whose faces had seen as much salt and weather as an old sail. They laughed shrilly, smoked pipes, and grabbed the pockets of anyone who leaned too close over them.

Joris, the one with two teeth, climbed onto a table. "I'll sing you something!" he babbled, and began screeching a sea shanty that sounded like an old dog tugging on a rusty chain. A chair leg flew, hitting him on the thigh, he fell, and the whole group laughed as if someone had spilled gold on the tables.

"You're too ugly to sing, Joris!" one yelled. "Then I'll just drink!" Joris yelled back and tipped the jug over himself. Half landed in his toothless mouth, the rest dripped onto his pants. And once again, the hut erupted.

Störtebeker stood in the middle of it all. He was the eye of the storm, only his eyes weren't still, they burned. He didn't drink to forget. He drank to remember that he was alive. Every sip was a punch against death. Every mug he downed was a spit in the face of the world that had long wanted to see him perish.

"You're crazy, Klaus!" slurred one of the boys, who hadn't yet figured out how to hold his tongue. Störtebeker grinned, broad as a cut-open fish. "Crazy?" he said. "Crazy is going to sea sober. Crazy is believing that life is anything other than a big, dirty jug that you have to drink before it tips over."

A yell, a roar, fists banging on tables, the rum flowing on. There was no more time, no night, no tomorrow. There was only the now, the drinking, the

laughter, the roaring feeling that you could tear the world off its hinges if you just emptied enough cups.

The rats were indeed fleeing. Under the tables, over the windowsills, into the darkness. It was always said that rats were leaving a sinking ship. Today they were leaving a sinking brain.

Bone Man slowly raised the mug and looked at Störtebeker. A brief nod, a silent acknowledgement. He wasn't one for big words. But that meant: Today the gang is alive. Today they are invincible. Tomorrow they might be dead, but that was the deal.

Outside, someone who had come in late screamed. Maybe a dockworker, maybe an idiot who thought he could pick a fight. Two men dragged him in and threw him to the ground. Störtebeker looked at him, took another sip, and grinned. "Welcome to paradise," he said. "The only way you'll get out of here is if you drink more than I do. Or not at all."

The man stared, not understanding. Someone pressed a jug into his hand. He raised it, hesitantly. "Drink!" yelled Joris. "Or the rats will get you!" He drank. Wrong, too timidly. He coughed, choked, and tipped half the jug over his chest. Laughter, kicks, ridicule. And again Störtebeker yelled: "One more! One more!"

It wasn't a celebration. It was a war against life. Every sip a stab in the gut of order. Every mug a cry against all the merchants sitting in their houses, good, clean, boring. Here, in this stinking dive, the kings were gathered—kings of sweat, rum, and curses.

And while the innkeeper kept rolling out new barrels, while the whores laughed and the men puked, while Knochenmann slowly but surely built up his drunkenness, Störtebeker stood like a damned tower in the storm, grinning, blood red, dripping with rum, unshakable.

The rats were right. Those who were smart left the place. But they weren't smart. They were just men who laughed, sang, and drank—until they dropped. Until the world stood still.

And somewhere in the background, someone was playing a fiddle, an old, out-of-tune violin that sounded like the wail of a drowning woman. But even that was drowned out by laughter. For the law of this night was clear:Drink until the rats run away.

The floor was sticky, like the mouth of a dog that's been rooting in garbage for too long. Every step made that squelching sound, as if the planks themselves were drowning. Someone stumbled, lay there, and no one knew if he was already dead or just asleep. No one bent down to look. If he was still breathing, he would get up on his own. If not, the innkeeper would carry him out in the morning like a sack of old rags.

Störtebeker had long since forgotten the jug and drank directly from the barrel. The tap was open, the wood cracked, and he sucked in the liquid as if he were feasting on the breast of the world itself. Rum flowed over his chest, his beard was dripping wet, and he wiped his face with his forearm. "Are you still alive?" he yelled to the group. "Then drink faster, or I'll think you're already in the grave!"

The men roared back, the roar not an echo, but a hurricane that reverberated through the narrow walls. Glasses shattered, hands slapped on tables, feet stamped as if someone were trying to ram the building into the ground. The whores, half-naked, half-bored, threw their skirts over the faces of the men sitting nearest to them and were rewarded with grabs and laughter.

Bone Man rose slowly, like a mountain deciding to take a step. He was the only one who didn't slur, who didn't roar. He rarely spoke, but when he did, everyone listened. "Klaus," he said, his voice like a stone falling into water, "the rats are gone. Doesn't that mean we've won?"

Störtebeker grinned, broadly and evilly. "Won? There's no such thing as won. There's only more to come. When the rats are gone, we'll get the cats. When the cats are gone, we'll get the dogs. And when even the dogs don't want to anymore, we'll drink God down from heaven until he spits in our faces."

The men raged. It was no longer laughter, but a howl that shook the rafters. A howl like wolves who realize they are not being hunted, but are the hunters. The innkeeper ducked behind the bar, so low he almost disappeared into it. He knew he wouldn't forget this night. He also knew that by tomorrow morning he would pull every damned thaler from the pockets of the dead or sleeping men who remained here.

A jug flew, missing Störtebeker by a whisker, and shattered on the wall behind him. He turned around, slowly, with that look that immediately made it clear to everyone: Someone's messed up. It was Joris, of course Joris, grinning again with his two teeth. "I just wanted to see if you were awake, Klaus!"

The knife flashed, faster than a blink. It was stuck in the table, just a finger's breadth from Joris's hand. Störtebeker stepped forward, placed his hand on his head, and pushed him down until his nose almost touched the splinters in the wood. "You're lucky I have too much rum in my system right now, otherwise I would have cut you in half like an old sail."

Joris laughed, a hysterical, raspy laugh that broke the tension. "Then pour me another cup, Captain, and I'll shut up!"
Störtebeker pulled the knife from the wood, slung it back on his belt, and nodded. "Give him a drink before he wakes us all up."

The barrels emptied, but no one wanted to leave. Time didn't exist. Night was a word that meant nothing here. There was only thirst, and as long as there was thirst, every breath was allowed. One man started playing cards, but he lost so quickly that he would have thrown the deck into the fire if two others hadn't grabbed him by the arm. Instead, he poured his beer over the cards, and the game was over.

At some point, someone started singing a ballad about a woman who had a new man in every port. The melody was off, the lyrics half-forgotten, but everyone sang along. They shouted the words as if they were orders. The whores danced to it, stamped their feet on the ground, and tossed their hair in circles. A cup flew, intentionally this time, and landed in the lap of one of them. She laughed, stood up on the table, lifted the cup, and drank it dry, as if she'd been waiting for this her whole life.

And while all this raged, Störtebeker stood there, tall, broad, his face chiseled as if from salt and fire. He looked at them, his men, his gang, his damned pack of fools. And in his gaze, there was no love, no friendship. There was only pride. Pride that they followed him. Pride that they weren't afraid to destroy themselves. Proud that they laughed while the world outside forged its chains.

He raised the jug, which was already full again, and roared: "Today we'll drink the heavens dry! Tomorrow the Hanseatic League will hang us from the gallows! But today, damn it, today we're gods!"

The answer was a roar, a roar, a thunder that made the walls tremble. And the rats outside, who had long since fled into the darkness, paused, listened, and understood: Inside, a madness raged that even they couldn't compete with.

And so the night went on, hour after hour, sip after sip, scream after scream. Men fell, men vomited, men sang. One fell asleep with his face in the bowl, one

perhaps died, but no one looked. For the law was clear:**Drink until the rats run away.**

The first prey and the first curse

The morning smelled of vomit, salt, and dead fish. A smell that clung, as if the night had decided to live on in his nostrils. Störtebeker stood with his legs wide apart at the bow, his head pounding like a damn bell. He could still feel yesterday's rum raging in his bones. But he grinned. He always grinned when he sensed something was coming.

The men crawled across the deck like insects. One held his belly, another vomited into a rope barrel. Bone Man pushed two of them aside with his foot without looking at them. "Stand up, you dogs," he growled, "or the sea will eat you before breakfast."

The ship creaked. The "Bunte Kuh" was more of a floating wonder than a real ship—too old, too often patched, more nails and curses than wood. But it held. It always held. Perhaps because it knew that no one on board was better than itself: spoiled, rusty, but indestructible.

"Landlubbers to the horizon!" yelled Joris, sobering too soon. He pointed ahead. On the gray edge of the sea, a sail loomed, white and fat, like a bulging belly begging to be ripped open. A merchant ship. Not armed enough to risk a battle, not fast enough to escape.

Störtebeker spat over the railing. The saliva mingled with the foam from the waves. "That's it. Our breakfast." The men raised their heads. Their eyes shone. Hunger, greed, hope. They had nothing but what they took. And that ahead was prey.

"Pull over to the right!" Bone Man commanded. The rudder creaked, the sails flapped in the wind. The "Bunte Kuh" pushed forward as fast as her rotten belly would allow. The water splashed, the planks trembled, and the men grabbed for ropes, weapons, and courage they'd drunk away yesterday.

The merchant ship approached. You could see the faces of the crew, pale with fear, hands on ropes, eyes as wide as plates. They knew what was coming. Everyone knew what was coming when that accursed, crooked pirate ship appeared on the horizon.

"Ran!" roared Störtebeker, his voice ripping through the wind. The grappling hooks flew, digging into the enemy's woodwork. The ships kissed roughly, plank against plank, as if neither had a choice.

The men charged. A roaring, stinking horde, half human, half animal. Störtebeker jumped first, knife in hand, a grin on his face. He landed hard, rolled, stood, and struck. Blood spurted, warm and sticky. His opponent stared at him in surprise, then collapsed like a sack of dirt.

It wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter. The traders were afraid, the pirates were hungry. Fear always loses to hunger. Bone Man swung an axe that had seen more wood than heads, but today it did its job. Joris bit an opponent in the ear as if he'd forgotten he also had a knife. One of the boys stumbled, took a blow, screamed, fell—and no one cared. That's how it was.

Störtebeker roared, stabbed, and laughed. He always laughed in battle. Not because it was fun, but because it was the only answer he could give to death. "Well, you fine gentlemen!" he shouted as he slashed open a merchant's stomach, "here you have paid your taxes!"

After minutes—or hours, who could count?—it was over. The deck of the merchant ship was red, the air filled with smoke and the smell of blood. The survivors knelt, hands raised, mouths silent. They knew begging would achieve nothing. There was no mercy here. Only quick or slow deaths.

"Secure the cargo!" Bone Man ordered. Men ran, ripping open crates, heaving barrels over. Grain, beer, cloths, a bit of silver. Not much, but enough. Enough to drink again tonight, enough to keep living tomorrow.

Störtebeker stood in the middle of the deck, a dead man's mug in his hand, blood in his beard. He grinned. "First catch, men! Today we drink to ourselves!"

A cheer erupted. Loud, dirty, full of teeth, and voices that knew more anger than joy. They had done it. They had taken what they wanted. They had survived.

But then the sky darkened. Gray turned black, the clouds gathered, the wind howled. The sea began to become choppy. The "Colorful Cow" trembled as if it knew what was coming.

"Storm!" someone shouted, and the men looked up. An omen. A curse. They had barely made their first catch when the sea tried to take them back.

"Let it come!" roared Störtebeker, his knife raised to the sky. "We fear nothing! Not the Hanseatic League, not the sea, not God himself!"

The thunder answered. Deep, rolling, like laughter from the belly of hell. And the men knew: The sea never forgets. And it always takes its toll.

Whores, hooks and lots of rum

The harbor smelled of everything the world discarded: fish heads, rotten crates, piss, sweat, wet wood that had seen more rats than sun for years. It was a smell that softened your brain, and that's precisely why Störtebeker loved it. Anyone standing here knew: decency had long since been thrown overboard.

The "Bunte Kuh" lay creaking at the quay, its planks cracked like the dentures of an old drunk. But it had brought loot. And loot meant rum, whores, and noise. The men swarmed out like lice from an old sack. Everyone picked out what they needed—and no one asked about tomorrow.

"Come on, Bone Man," said Störtebeker, jumping from the ship. The impact with the planks was hard, but he just grinned, as if the earth had welcomed him. Bone Man nodded, wordlessly, and trudged after him. Two towers of flesh and hunger, on their way to a city that knew what to expect when this gang came.

The alleys were narrow, the lamps flickered, and in every doorway stood a face that wavered between curiosity and fear. Everyone knew that these men paid when they were in the mood—but also that they took when the money ran out. And the money always ran out.

The first pub was called "Zum Blauen Herring." A dive bar that smelled of beer liquor and the sweat of men who hadn't bathed in months. Just the right place. Störtebeker pushed the door open so hard that it slammed against the wall and entered as if the place already belonged to him.

A dull silence fell over the room. Sailors, dockworkers, two prostitutes, an innkeeper who looked like a badly smoked eel. All eyes were glued to Störtebeker and his gang, who were pushing in behind him. For a moment, it was silent, only the creaking of the floorboards beneath their boots could be heard. Then he roared: "Rum for everyone, until the floor floats!"

The silence broke into a murmur, and the barman hurried to tap kegs. Glasses clinked, hands grabbed, and the commotion began. The men sipped, swallowed, and laughed. Rum flowed over the tables, dripped onto the floor, mixed with blood when one of the sailors casually broke his nose just by standing in the way.

Störtebeker took the first mug, drank it in one gulp, and threw it against the wall. "One more!" he yelled, and the innkeeper obeyed. The whores approached, their skirts dirty, their voices harsh. One sat on his lap, tugging at his beard. "You're the one with the name," she whispered. "The one who drinks more than the sea can drink."

He grinned. "Then hold on tight, darling, or you'll drown."

The men raged, sang, and screamed. One slammed his knife on the table in time with the music, leaving small scars in the wood. Another ripped open his shirt, poured rum over his chest, and lit it. The fire burned, he screamed, and two comrades beat it out with beer mugs. Laughter, jeers, screams.

Bone Man sat in the corner, two whores on his knees, a pipe in his mouth. He didn't speak a word, but his gaze kept the entire bar at bay. No one dared to go near him. Everyone knew: If he moved, someone would die.

Joris stood on the table, his pants half-open, singing a song about a whore from Riga who cheated on three men at once. His voice was so off-key that the windows shook. One of the dockworkers covered his ears, and Joris jumped on him, pulled him to the ground, and kissed him on the mouth. The men yelled, the worker vomited.

Störtebeker drank, laughed, screamed. He was the center, the eye, the fire. The world around him blurred, but he stood clear, immobile, a rock in the midst of a storm of rum and noise. Everyone knew he was the reason all this was happening. And everyone knew he'd be the first to smash the place to pieces if anyone dared to look at him askance.

And that's exactly what happened.

A strange sailor, tall, broad, with scars on his face, stared at him. Too long. Too hard. Störtebeker noticed immediately, turned to him, and grinned. "What are you looking at, asshole?"

The sailor spat on the floor. "All I see is a drunk who thinks he's something."

The bar fell silent. The men paused, the whores retreated. All eyes on the two of them. Störtebeker slowly stood up, put down the mug, and wiped his mouth. His grin was broad but cold. "Then you're damn right."

It didn't take a second. The sailor reached for his knife, but Störtebeker was faster. His own dagger flashed, digging into the tabletop, just centimeters from the stranger's hand. "One more drag, friend," he growled, "and I'll show you what it looks like when a man drinks without hands."

The men held their breath. The sailor hesitated. Then he withdrew his hand, slowly, carefully. Störtebeker laughed. Loudly, dirty, like a dog marking its territory. "Good man. Then drink with us, or get lost."

The sailor sat down, picked up a mug, and drank. The bar erupted in jeers and laughter, as if the danger had been nothing more than a joke. But everyone knew: This was just the beginning.

The night was young. The barrels were full. The whores laughed, the knives flashed, and somewhere in the corner the rats wept because they knew: There was no way out today.

The night wasn't going well, it was staggering. And that's exactly how they loved it. The "Blue Herring" had long since had more broken furniture than guests, and the innkeeper silently prayed that they would soon continue drinking somewhere else. But Störtebeker and his gang had only just warmed up.

"Get out of here!" he yelled at one point, throwing the mug into the corner, where it shattered into shards. "The whores are waiting somewhere else, and the night's too big for just one bar."

The men obeyed, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. When Störtebeker left, they went with him. Those who stayed behind were left alone—and being alone was worse than death. So they swarmed out, stumbled across the quay, and bellowed their songs into the alleys. Dogs barked, windows slammed shut, a child began to scream. But no one stood in their way.

The brothel at the end of the street was called "The Golden Mast," and the only thing golden here was the discharge in the chamber pots. But the sign was still hanging, and the lanterns cast a red light over the crooked door. Inside, it

smelled of cheap perfume, sweat, beer, and piss—a mixture that only sailors would recognize as inviting.

The girls were already waiting. Heavy makeup, thin dresses, voices that knew more curses than any sea shanty. One of them approached Störtebeker, large-breasted, with a laugh as fake as a Hanseatic charter. "Well, sailor? Are you looking for love?"

"Love stinks," he growled, grabbing her hips. "I'm looking for something harder." She laughed, but her look betrayed that she understood: This wasn't about affection; this was about the body—and about survival.

The men dispersed. Everyone sought a warm lap, a full bottle, a dark corner. Joris disappeared with two girls at once, screaming like a pig being slaughtered, but it sounded like joy. Bone Man stayed at the bar, drinking silently, while a girl tried in vain to take the jug from his hand. "I'm drinking faster than you can breathe," he simply said, and she left him alone.

It wasn't long before the first screams came not from pleasure, but from a fight. Two sailors from another ship had the same taste as Störtebecker's men. And taste meant: the same whore.

"That's mine!" slurred the stranger, a tall man with a knife in his belt. "Your mother, perhaps," one of Störtebeker's boys snapped back, and fists flew.

The brothel became an arena. Tables crashed, glasses shattered, chairs broke over backs. One man flew through the door, got up again, and staggered back inside. The girls' perfume mingled with the men's blood, and their screams became a wild chorus, half lust, half panic.

Störtebeker stood in the middle, grinning as he watched. He loved the chaos. He loved the sound of breaking bones, the smell of rum and sweat, the hysterical laughter of men who no longer knew fear. Then one of the strangers grabbed him, a blow, too hasty, too inaccurate. Störtebeker grabbed the man by the collar, slammed him against the wall, so hard that the plaster crumbled. "Wrong choice, friend," he growled, drew his knife, and pressed it to his throat.

"Please..." the man stammered, and Störtebeker laughed. "Please, there's no such thing as a plea," he said, lowering the blade—but only into his shoulder. Blood spurted, the man screamed, staggered, and fell. "That's for next time. Today you can live. But only so you can tell everyone who's been drinking here."

The men continued to rage. Rum flowed, blood flowed, and somewhere in between, the whores laughed, because they knew: As long as the guys paid or fought, the night was their business.

Bone Man finally stepped forward, one hand on the axe he pulled from his belt. He raised it high and slammed it into the table, splintering the wood. "Enough!" he roared. His voice was deep as thunder. And for a moment, everyone actually stopped. Even the drunks, even the whores, even Störtebeker.

Then the red bastard grinned and raised his mug. "He's right," he said. "Enough fighting. Time to drink." The men roared in agreement; the fight was over. Not out of reason, but because the rum was more important. And because everyone knew that all it took was one wrong word and it would all start up again.

The night dragged on. Cup after cup, scream after scream. Men lay in bed with the whores, snoring, cursing, laughing. Others lay unconscious on the floor, and no one kicked them because they would soon wake up again anyway.

Störtebeker stood at the window, looking out at the sea. The water glittered black, the wind smelled of storm. He knew that tomorrow they would have to go back out, back to the planks, back to hunger, back to battle. But today? Today the world belonged to them.

“Another mug!” he yelled, and the cry went through the entire brothel like a law that no one could disobey.

And again the rum flowed. And again reason fled. And somewhere beneath the floorboards a rat crawled out, looked around, sniffed—and ran back into the darkness.

Because even for rats this night was too much.

The night had long since ceased to be evening; it was an animal. A fat, slobbering cur that ate everything that moved—and they were right in its stinking mouth. The brothel groaned under their weight, the beams creaked, the air was so thick you could have cut it. And yet no one wanted to leave.

Störtebeker stood in the middle of the room, barefoot now, his boots long since lost in some corner. His shirt hung in tatters from his shoulders, his beard glistened with rum and sweat. He laughed, a deep, rumbling laugh that promised more than any sermon. In one hand he still held a jug, in the other a

knife. And he was ready to use both—depending on whether someone wanted to drink or die.

Meanwhile, the whores were dancing on the tables. Their skirts were hiked up, their voices shrill, and they sang along as if they were part of the crew. One of them, blond and thin like an overstretched violin, poured rum down her cleavage, and two sailors pounced on her, licking, drinking, and biting. The laughter erupted like a wave.

Joris, the one with the two teeth, was already naked. He ran across the room, a belt in his hand, hitting everyone and everything in his path. "Whore! Rum! Heaven!" he screamed, and no one knew whether he was laughing or crying. Probably both.

Bone Man had found peace in the chaos. He sat there, like a monument, and drank. Two girls lay against him, one on his left, one on his right, both already half asleep, but he was awake. Always awake. His gaze wandered, cold and sure, over the chaos. If someone came too close, if someone dared too much, he merely raised an eyebrow – and the person stepped back. You could kill the men, you could beat them. But Bone Man was the line no one crossed.

And yet it only took one spark to make everything explode.

The spark was a knife. A strange sailor, one of the lads who hadn't been deterred by the first brawl, pulled it out from under the table. He was too drunk to aim, but not drunk enough not to try. The blade flashed, ran across the arm of one of Störtebecker's lads, and tore a red line into the flesh.

The roar was immediate. The victim screamed, overturned the table, and suddenly the entire brothel was a battlefield. Chairs flew, glasses shattered, blood mingled with the rum. Screams, laughter, the shrieks of the whores, the clapping of fists, and the splintering of wood—it was an orchestra of madness.

Störtebeker was in the thick of it. His knife found targets, fast, precise, cruel. He didn't stab to fight. He stabbed to kill. One fell, another retreated, and the grin on his face grew wider as more blood clung to the blade. "You want to play?" he yelled. "Then we'll play until our last breath!"

Joris jumped on a man, bit his ear, and tore at it like an animal. Blood spurted, the man screamed, staggered, and fell. "I have an ear!" Joris shrieked, holding it up, laughing like a madman.

The whores screamed, some fled, others stayed, clapped, and cheered. They had seen this a hundred times before – and knew: the more blood flowed, the more coins would roll across the floor later.

Bone Man finally rose. Slowly, heavily. He reached for his axe, pulled it from his belt, and as he raised it, everyone fell silent for a moment. Then he struck. Not to kill anyone, but to split the table in half. Wood splintered, the sound thundered through the room, and everyone stopped.

"Enough," he growled, his voice as deep as the sea itself. But Störtebeker just laughed. "Enough?" he shouted. "There's no such thing as enough! We're not full yet!"

He lifted the jug, emptied it in one gulp, and then threw it into the crowd. That was the signal. Once again, the room exploded. Fights, screams, blood. One man flew through the window and landed outside on the street. Another had his head pressed into a barrel until he stopped wriggling.

Störtebeker fought, drank, laughed. He was no longer human, he was a storm. He was the sea in one body, unpredictable, brutal, unstoppable. Men followed him because he showed them that there were no limits. No rules. No mercy.

At some point, the floor was covered in blood and splinters. Men groaned, whores collected coins, the innkeeper wept quietly in a corner. Bone Man still stood, his axe in the wood, unmoving, but his eyes sparkled. Joris danced naked on a table, waving his ear like a trophy.

And Störtebeker? He stood in the midst of it all, bloodstained, drenched in sweat, the jug in his hand again. He raised it high, and his voice growled: "Tonight the world belongs to us! Tomorrow perhaps the rope—but tonight we are gods!"

The men roared, the whores screamed, the brothel shook. Outside, the rats fled into the darkness. Even they had had enough of this madness.

And so the night ended not in peace, not in sleep, but in a bloodbath that spared no one. For the law was:**Whores, hooks and lots of rum.**

A knife between friends

The sun showed no mercy. It beat against the planks of the "Bunte Kuh" as if it wanted to burn the old wood. The men lay around like corpses that had been forgotten. Some snored, others groaned, a few vomited over the railing. The night in the dives had taken more than it gave, and now every barrel of rum, every whore, every fight was taking its revenge.

Störtebeker stood at the bow, barefoot, his shirt open, his eyes red as if filled with blood. He held a cup in his hand, no longer full, but still his sanctuary. The wind played with his beard, which stank of everything the night had spewed forth. And he grinned because he knew: This was how it had to be. No morning without the feeling of being half dead. That was the only way to live.

"Get up, you dogs!" Bone Man roared. His voice was deep, raspy, and it echoed across the deck like a cannon shot. Two men flinched, one rolled onto his side with a groan. "The sea won't wait for you to sleep in."

A few laughed, others cursed. But they got up. One immediately fell over again, his face covered in his own vomit. No one helped him. Help was a foreign concept out here. Everyone had enough to do just to stay out of the water.

The planks creaked, the ropes squealed, the sails billowed heavily in the wind. It was a ship breathing slowly, knowing it would soon taste blood again. The "Bunte Kuh" wasn't a pretty sight—nails protruded from the planks, the railing was cracked, the wood blackened with salt and time. But it carried them, time and time again, no matter how many nights they nearly broke on it.

"Water!" Joris cried, his voice brittle, like a rusty nail. He staggered out of the hatch, his shirt open, his hair matted. In his hand, he held a cup that didn't contain water, but the remains of a bottle of rum. "Water, damn it! Or another barrel! My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth like a damn eel."

Störtebeker laughed. "Then rip out your tongue, Joris. Save water." A few men laughed along, others didn't. They were too tired, too worn out. But the laughter was like salt on a wound—it burned, and that's precisely why it felt good.

A young lad, still wet behind the ears, suddenly stood up. He was one of those who had joined the band weeks ago because they thought the pirate life was freedom. His face was pale, his hands shaking, and he said, quietly but loudly

enough: "We can't go on like this. We'll drink ourselves to death before the Hanse finds us."

It was quiet. Not for long, but enough. Everyone heard, everyone understood what he had said. Then laughter erupted, wild, evil, like a pack of dogs that has smelled blood.

"Dead?" shrieked Joris, his two teeth glinting in the light. "Boy, we're long dead! We're only running because we've forgotten how to stay down!"

The boy swallowed, trying to stand his ground. "I just mean... if we keep going like this, we'll be weak. In the next fight—"

Störtebeker turned around. Slowly, heavily. His gaze burned, and his grin was broad, but dangerous. "In the next fight?" he repeated. "In the next fight, you'll be at the front, little one. And if you still complain, I'll slit your throat before the enemy does."

The men laughed again, roared, and slapped their thighs. But the boy held his gaze. He was stupid enough, brave enough not to look away. And that was precisely what made him dangerous.

"We need order," he dared to say. "Not just drinking and whoring. We need..."

He got no further. A knife hissed, quick, quiet. It pierced the wood next to his head, so close he could smell the iron. Störtebeker stood before him, barely a step away, his hand still outstretched. "Order?" he growled. "The only order here is that I decide when someone like you shuts up."

The boy trembled, but he didn't back down. And that made the men uneasy. It was like scratching the paint of their madness. One of them, an old pirate with only one eye, spat on the ground and said, "Leave him alone. He's just a child."

Störtebeker turned his head and looked at the old man. "A child? Children die too. Usually faster than men." His voice was quiet, but everyone heard it. Everyone knew what it meant.

Bone Man stepped in. Not quickly, not loudly, just with his sheer presence. He placed his hand on Störtebeker's shoulder, and the red bastard looked at him. For a moment, there was something in his eyes that looked like anger. But then he grinned again, raised his hands. "Good. The child is alive. But only because Bone Man is hungry and doesn't feel like a funeral."

The men laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. They knew this wasn't over. They knew the boy wouldn't last long.

The day dragged on. The sun burned, the sea rolled, the men worked sluggishly, half drunk, half awake. But beneath the surface, there was simmering tension. Distrust, fatigue, anger. Everyone knew that the next night wouldn't just bring rum. It would bring blood.

And Störtebeker stood at the bow, looking at the horizon, cup in hand, and grinned. Because he knew he hadn't thrown the knife in vain.

The evening fell upon them as it always did: harsh, dirty, without romance. The sea lay dark, the "Bunte Kuh" groaned, and the men squatted among barrels, ropes, and the remains of fish no one wanted to eat anymore. Rum flowed. Of course it flowed. But this time it tasted different. Bitter. Sharper. Because there was something in the air that burned more than any barrel.

The boy—the one who had said too much that morning—sat off to the side. His face was pale, his eyes dark. He didn't drink. And that was his fault. Anyone who didn't drink here was suspect. Anyone who stayed sober saw too much. Anyone who saw didn't live long.

"Hey, little one!" Joris staggered toward him, a pitcher in his hand, his two teeth flashing in the moonlight. "Why aren't you drinking? Afraid your dick's going to fall off?" Laughter, roaring, filthy.

The boy shook his head. "I've had enough. I need to stay clear-headed."

"Clear?" Joris shrieked, as if he'd just heard the joke of his life. "Clearly, no one's here except the knives. And they speak more clearly than you." He poured rum over the boy's head, and the men laughed.

The boy jumped up, too quickly, too furiously. He pushed Joris away, hard, surprisingly hard. Joris stumbled and fell against a barrel. For a moment, there was silence. Then he stood up again. And in his hand, a knife gleamed.

"Now you've done it," he slurred. "Now it's your turn."

The men held their breath. Störtebeker stood up, watched, and said nothing. His eyes sparkled, and his grin was thin. He loved such moments. It was as if life itself was holding its breath, just before it bursts forth again.

The boy didn't hesitate. He also drew a knife, trembling but gripped firmly. His gaze was clear, sober, full of fear and anger. "Come on," he said. "I have nothing to lose."

Joris laughed, a hoarse, insane laugh. "Nothing to lose? Then you'll learn how to lose." He charged forward, knife raised. The boy dodged, quickly, faster than anyone would have thought possible. He raised his knife, stabbed—and the blade cut Joris in the arm. Blood spurted, Joris roared, staggered back.

The men screamed, yelled, and hooted. Some cheered, others were already betting on who would die. For them, this wasn't a drama; it was entertainment. A game.

"Kill him!" one yelled. "Show him who's boss!" "No, leave the boy alone!" another cried, perhaps out of pity, perhaps because he had bet against Joris.

Störtebeker grinned and looked at Knochenmann. "Want to bet?" Knochenmann just shook his head. "They'll both die. Sooner or later. Why bet?"

Joris attacked again, wild, furious, unpredictable. The boy backed away, almost tripped over a rope, caught himself, and stabbed again. This time he missed. Joris's knife caught him on the shoulder, tearing a long, bloody line through his flesh. The boy screamed and fell to his knees.

“Now you are mine!” roared Joris, and he raised the knife for the fatal thrust.

But then Störtebeker intervened. Not slowly, not quickly, but just in time. His hand gripped Joris's arm, hard as iron. The knife stopped, just centimeters above the boy's head.

"Enough," growled Störtebeker. The men fell silent. Even Joris remained silent, panting, foaming, blood dripping from his arm.

"But he—" he stammered. "He's alive," said Störtebeker coldly. "Because I say so. And you're alive too, Joris. Still."

He let go of the arm and stepped back, but his gaze was like a dagger. "Friends don't kill each other. Not yet. First we kill the Hanse, then we kill ourselves. Understood?"

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, others grinned, others looked away. But everyone knew: Störtebeker had spoken. And when he spoke, it was the law.

The boy sat on his knees, blood running down his shoulder. He was breathing heavily, but he was alive. And he knew that he hadn't survived because he was strong, but because Störtebeker wanted him to.

Joris growled and put away the knife. "This isn't over," he hissed. Störtebeker grinned. "Nothing is ever over. But today we're drinking. Tomorrow we'll see."

The men laughed, the ice was broken, chaos returned to normal. Rum flowed again, voices grew louder, and the danger was forgotten. For the moment.

But beneath the surface, things continued to simmer. Everyone knew: the knife hadn't disappeared. It was just waiting.

And Störtebeker stood there, the cup in his hand again, a grin on his lips, and thought:*A knife between friends is more honest than any friendship.*

Night rose from the sea, black and silent as a bad promise. The "Bunte Kuh" lay heavy in the water, as if she had drunk too much, and the men sat scattered across the deck in islands of shadow. Only the lantern on the mainmast flickered, a yellow eye that saw all and betrayed nothing. The wind was almost gone, only a tired breath tickling the salt and mold. And somewhere below deck, someone was singing softly, out of tune, a song without words.

The boy lay against the railing, his shoulder hastily bandaged. The linen was dirty, blood seeping through it, as if his body had decided to lose it slowly and stubbornly, drop by drop, until nothing remained to hurt. He had his gaze fixed on the horizon, as if he wanted to split it with his eyes. He didn't drink. He didn't dare anymore. Thirst burned like a punishment, but it held him tight like a life preserver. Being sober was the only thing he had left.

Joris sat further ahead, on an upturned barrel, a bandage on his arm, a knife bare on his thigh. He grinned that crooked grin of a man who considers himself immortal because death has just missed him for the third time. Beside him crouched two old men who had seen too many nights to have any respect. They whispered bets to each other, so quietly that even the wind couldn't hear them. One bet on the boy, "because young blood sometimes screams longer." The other bet on Joris, "because the devil knows his children."

Bone Man stood at the helm. He didn't need a hand on it; the ship barely moved. But he stood there, tall, silent, a wooden judge with skin and breath. When he turned his head, silence settled like dew over the planks. If he didn't,

everyone talked too loudly. That was the order on board: the silence of one man, enough to remind others that they were mortal.

Störtebeker was nowhere to be seen. This made the men nervous. When the red bastard laughed, they knew who to direct his smile at. When he drank, they knew they were still allowed to live. When he was silent, no one knew whether a judgment was being passed in his head. And his head passed judgments like an axe: without anger, without joy, only with gravity.

"Hey, little one," Joris finally said. His voice crawled across the deck like a rat that's decided to bite again tonight. "How does it feel to be Bone Man's favorite? Did he baptize you? Did he give you a name? Holy Virgin of Perverted Dew?"

A few laughed. Not many. The laughter didn't fit well with the calm that lay over them like a wet sack. The boy didn't raise his eyes. "Leave me alone," he said, so quietly it was almost not there. "Or I'll finish this."

"Over?" Joris clapped his hands, very quietly, a mocking applause. "Do you hear that, you dogs? The little one wants to finish it. A hero is born. One who dies sober. You'll tell stories about him in the brothels when you've lost the coin. The whores will cry with laughter."

A cup flew, not strongly, just far enough to land at Joris's feet. Water. A puddle. The yellow glowed in the lantern, and the deck stood still for a heartbeat. Then Joris kicked the cup across the planks, and the soft sloshing of the water was louder than any roar.

"Stand up, little one," he said. "Come over to me. We'll finish what we started. No mercy. No referees. Just wood, wind, and knives. That's how men do it."

The boy breathed slowly. He didn't stand up immediately. He had understood that in the time you hesitate, the most important thing often happens: someone shows who they are. He looked sideways at the rudder. Bone Man didn't move. He looked at the hatch. No one came. He looked into the darkness at the bow. There he was.

Störtebeker stepped forward as if a shadow had spat him out. Barefoot. His shirt open, the knife not visible, but everyone knew where it was. He stood between the two lines of breath and gaze. He said nothing. He didn't have to say anything. The ship waited for him like it waited for the wind. Only when he

raised the cup and drank—briefly, succinctly, expediently—did a jolt go through the men. As if someone had pulled the rope on the horizon.

"I said it this morning," he began, his voice dry as salt. "Friends don't kill each other. Not yet. First others, then us. That's the order. That's the law. And if any of you think you're above the law, you can try. The sea will eat you up and spit you out on some beach so the seagulls can peck the rest of the stories off your face."

Joris stood up. Slowly. Carefully. Not like a coward, but like a man searching for a landing in a burning house. "With all due respect, Captain," he said, every syllable a piece of dirt, "but the law is for those who drink too slowly. The little guy stuck a knife in my arm. I want to pay him back. Not tomorrow. Now."

A murmur. Men shifted their weight as if they had already made room for blood. The boy finally stood. He was pale, but his knees were strong. He drew his knife. Slowly. Not theatrically, more like he was pulling a thorn from his own skin.

"Klaus," Bone Man grumbled. Just his name. Not a sentence. A warning rope stretched over pain.

Störtebeker turned his head, just a finger's breadth, and the lantern light cast a ridge across his face that looked as if the wind had left it there. "I hear you, Hinnerk," he said. "But I also hear the sea. And I hear the night breathing, and the night is thirsty today."

He turned back to the two of them. "Good," he said. "One of us. One of us finishes his sentence. One of us finishes his knife. And one of us learns." He felt in his belt, pulled out something barely visible in the darkness. Not a knife. A short rope, a knot as thick as a thumb, with lead in the belly. A judge's button.

"No blades on my wood," he said. "Not today. You want to settle it, then with what everyone has: bones, breath, heart. Whoever falls, stays down. Whoever breathes, lives. Whoever spits, spit over the railing. Whoever bites, I'll break their jaw. And if someone breaks the rule, I'll break them. Simple as that."

Joris stared at the rope as if it had insulted him. Then he grinned. "As you wish, Captain." He put away the knife and rubbed the bandage. "I have two hands and enough anger for three men."

The boy said nothing. He put his knife away, so obediently that it was dangerous again. His fingers weren't shaking. Or they were shaking so much that it looked like cold.

The men formed a circle, as best they could on deck. "Dish of the day," one said under his breath, and the phrase ran like a mouse around the ring. There were no whores or rum here. There was nothing but breath and wood and the captain's voice, which answered questions no one dared to ask.

“Start,” said Störtebeker.

Joris went in first, that's how he was. One step, crooked, then the knot like a small wave hitting a knee. The boy jumped back, not far enough, the knot grazed his hip. Pain shot across his face, but he didn't make a sound. Joris laughed. Second blow, higher, faster. The boy ducked, the knot whooshed over the top of his head, ripping a few hairs with it. Third blow, deep, fast. The boy jumped to the side, caught on the rope, stumbled, caught himself, and caught his breath. Joris charged after him like a dog smelling blood.

"Stand up!" Bone Man growled, not at the boy, but at the world. And strangely enough, she stood up. Just enough for the boy to catch his breath.

The boy changed his stance. He did something no one expected: He stepped forward. Not quickly, not heroically. He stepped into Joris, shoulder first, and rammed him in the chest. Joris gasped, stumbled back, the knot slamming into his own rib. Laughter, short, disgustingly honest. Joris's face darkened.

“Not bad,” murmured Störtebeker, without sounding like praise.

The fight dragged on, as fights drag on when no one knows whether death will have mercy today. Joris was furious, wild, impatient. The boy was quiet, pedantic, with that sober anger that only one can summon who has understood that there are no second chances, only a longer fall. The knot sang its dull song. Thighs, flanks, back, shoulders. Sweat spurted, blood mixed with it, and the deck smelled of iron, salt, and nerves.

Then the boy made a mistake. Mistakes happen as surely as low tide. He pursued, too far, too greedily for someone who shouldn't be greedy. Joris dodged, a half-step, barely there, and the knot struck the boy on the side of the temple. The light in his eyes flickered. He buckled, his hands searching for purchase, found wood that offered no answer. Joris lifted the rope, both hands on the line, lead like a star about to fall.

"Stop," said Störtebeker. Nothing about him moved.

Joris didn't stop.

The lead rode, a clean arc, learned in a thousand bar fights and thirty years of miserable living. It would have been enough. It would have extinguished the boy like a lantern in a storm. But the world tended to turn against plans. A hard hand grabbed Joris's forearm in the air, stopped the swing, and froze the lead in half.

Bone Man. He suddenly stood next to him, as if he'd been thrown from the deck. Not a word. Joris gasped, anger, helplessness, foam. "Let go," he snarled, "he's—"

"Enough," said Bone Man. Again that word, which, in his mouth, was not a command, but a state of mind.

“I decide,” said Störtebeker.

The two sentences hit Joris like nails. He pulled himself away, or tried to. He raised his chin and spat to the side. "You want to keep him, Klaus? Someone sober? Someone with a clear head? You know what that means. Order is poison. Order is a scourge."

Störtebeker approached. He smelled of rum, blood, and the sea. "I know what poison is," he said calmly. "They are men who don't realize when to stop. Men who believe that anger gives them a right."

Joris laughed. It wasn't a laugh. More like a cough with his teeth. "Then start with me, Captain. If you have the courage." He raised his chin even higher, as if to show the rope where it belonged.

The men stopped murmuring. They were breathing louder. The boy propped himself up, staggered, and held onto the railing. His gaze was no longer searching anywhere. Only at the planks, as if he needed to check whether the world was even more solid than he was.

Störtebeker nodded. Not to Joris. To no one. A small, private nod that looked as if he'd tossed a coin into an invisible cup. Then he took out the knife. This knife that was never just iron in his hands.

"Klaus," someone said hoarsely. Whether it was a warning or a plea, not even the mouth that uttered it knew.

"You wanted to finish," Störtebeker said quietly to Joris. "The end is always the same: One stands. One lies. And the one standing drinks."

He stepped so close that Joris's breath lifted his shirt. For a moment they looked at each other. There was no history between them worth sharing. Only nights, prey, noise. Brothers who weren't brothers.

Then Störtebeker moved. It wasn't a big cut. It was a clean one. A line where the throat is soft, where men swallow once more when they've understood. Joris reached for the nothingness that everyone reaches for when there's none left. Blood came, warm, dark. He fell to his knees. He looked surprised, truly surprised, as if the world had told him a bad joke too soon.

No one shouted. No one applauded. The sea made its old, friendly-cynical noise against the side of the ship. One man made the sign of the cross. Another shoved his hands in his pockets, as if he were a boy again. Bone Man didn't look away. The boy stood, staggered, persevered.

Störtebeker wiped the knife on his shirt, which no longer had any color other than blood. "Law," he said. That was all. The word fell to the planks like a stray nail.

Two men lifted Joris, dragging him, matter-of-factly, like moving a barrel that's spilled. Over the railing. A quiet splash. The sea made no judgment. It took. It always takes.

Silence lasted. Silence was chewable. Somewhere, wood cracked. A rope tightened. Someone sniffed. Life groped its way back into the deck like water in cracks.

Störtebeker looked at the boy. No comfort. No hand. Just a look that said:*You see? That's it.*The boy nodded. Not out of gratitude. Out of a certainty that hurt. "What now?" he asked, his voice harsh from the grip the night had placed on them.

"Now you drink," said Störtebeker. "Not because you should celebrate. Because you have to live." He handed him the cup. The boy took it and raised it to his lips. The rum cut like a knife. He drank anyway. He drank like someone who has realized that everything that keeps him warm burns.

Bone Man laid the rope next to the hatch. The judge's knob slid into the shadow as if it had done its job. "West?" he asked, a single word that meant direction, even if the wind was asleep.

"West," said Störtebeker. His gaze was fixed on the darkness beyond the lantern. "Out there lies someone who thinks he can count us. He'll be wrong."

The men began to arrange the ropes as if nothing had happened. That's what you do when something happens. One of them pulled the lantern a little closer to the mainmast so it wouldn't be smothered by the next breath. One of them cleared his throat and began a line that began like a song and ended like a gulp.

The "Colorful Cow" sighed. Perhaps in her sleep. Perhaps because she sensed what happens to men when they think they're far from their turn. The water slapped its eternal slurp against the planks, and somewhere in the ship's belly, another drop of blood fell, finding its way through the cracks.

Störtebeker stood alone at the bow again. He lowered his cup and rested his hands on the railing, as if he had to rub his forehead against the world. He thought nothing that could be expressed. Perhaps he thought: Order is poison, yes. But poison also keeps rats away. And they'd seen enough rats.

"Mast and break," he said, so quietly that only the wind heard. The wind hadn't returned yet. But it would come. Winds always come, like debts and ropes and stories that last longer than men.

Behind him, the boy cleared his throat. "Captain?" "Hmm?" "Thank you," said the boy, and the word fell heavily onto the wood. "Don't waste it," said Störtebeker without turning around. "Tomorrow you'll need it to die or kill. Today you'll need it to sleep."

He walked away, barefoot, silently. Bone Man stepped to the helm as if he'd never left. The lantern stretched its yellow eye over the planks, and the ship tilted ever so slightly to one side, as if seeking a more comfortable position in a world that rarely allows for comfort. Waves rolled overboard, knowing nothing and knowing everything.

A knife between friends is more honest than any friendship. And the only thing more honest than honesty is the sea.

The captain who never wanted to be one

The morning after was quiet. Too quiet. No bawling, no vomiting, no cursing. Only the lapping of the sea against the belly of the "Colorful Cow" and the

creaking of wood that had seen too much. It was the kind of silence that makes men nervous because they know it's not natural.

Störtebeker stood at the bow, jug in hand, half empty, half full, like everything in life. His beard was still sticky with the blood that had flowed over the planks yesterday. Joris was gone. A splash, and then nothing. No grave, no cross, just the sea, which eats men and never belches.

The crew avoided his gaze. They worked as best they could, hoisting ropes, mending sails, scrubbing planks. But they didn't laugh. They didn't curse. And that made the "Bunte Kuh" dangerous. A pirate ship without noise was like a barrel of rum without a hole: It would eventually explode.

Bone Man stood at the helm. He didn't speak, he didn't need to. Everyone knew that his hand was the only thing keeping the ship on course. He looked at Störtebeker, just briefly, a nod. Nothing more. But it was enough for the bastard to know: Today, the whole damned burden rested on him.

He never wanted to be a captain. He was never born to give orders. Orders were for men who believed in order. In maps, in rules, in contracts. Störtebeker believed in none of that. He believed in rum, in knives, in the sea that takes everything. And yet – there he stood. With every breath, a captain, whether he wanted to be or not.

"Klaus!" one of the men shouted. It was the one-eyed man who had bet yesterday that the boy would die first. His eye sparkled, his mouth crooked. "What now? Course where? We need loot. We need land. The barrels are emptier than your head!"

A few laughed, timidly, uncertainly. Others cast quick, flickering glances. That was it: the cracks, slowly widening.

Störtebeker turned his head. His grin was thin. "Course?" He raised the cup and poured the rest over the railing. "Out there. Always out there. There lies what we need. There lies everything we are."

"And if nothing comes?" shouted another, thin, young man whose name no one remembered. "Then we'll drink salt water and eat each other!"

"Then you'll be the first we eat," said Störtebeker, without raising his voice. And again they laughed, that nervous, creaky laugh that was more fear than joy.

The boy from last time—the one who had survived—stood silently at the railing. His gaze was glued to the horizon, and he didn't speak a word. But his presence alone was a needle in the crew's flesh. They knew he was still alive because Störtebeker wanted him to be. And that made him dangerous.

"We need order," murmured one. "Order?" growled another. "Order will bring us the noose faster than the Hanseatic League. We need chaos. Chaos will keep us free." "Chaos will devour us!" "Better eaten than starved!"

Voices grew louder, sharper, harsher. The deck filled with resentment, like a storm growing in the sails. And in the midst of it all stood Störtebeker, knife at his belt, hands steady.

"Stop," he said quietly. But his voice cut through the shouting. They fell silent, all of them, one by one. Even the wind held its breath.

"You want order? You want chaos? You want a law?" He spat over the railing. "The law is simple: He who lives, lives because I say so. He who dies, dies because he stands in my way. That's all."

The words fell heavily, like stones into water. And everyone knew: This wasn't just a saying, this was the truth.

He never wanted to be a captain. But he was one. Not because he could steer a ship. But because he was the one thing men feared more than the sea.

And as the sun sank lower and the waves grew darker, he knew that the night would bring knives again. Because on the "Bunte Kuh," friendship only lasted until the next jug was empty.

Midday melted into a thick broth of heat, salt, and bad mood. The "Bunte Kuh" pushed through the water with a reluctant creak like an old cart. No good wind, just a tired breath that insulted the sails instead of filling them. The men had too much time to think, and thinking is poison for a gang that thrives on forgetfulness.

"Water down to half ration," Bone Man growled when he saw the condition of the barrels. The word "half" pierced the ranks like a splinter. One cursed, another spat, a third laughed for no reason. Störtebeker stood by, watched, said nothing. It was the kind of silence that meant more than any shouting.

The boy—still nameless among the others—carried two buckets forward. He walked without a groan, even though the bandage on his temple was dark. One

of the old men tripped him. It was small, cheap, a prank by a man too cowardly to have courage. The boy stumbled, caught himself, and carried on. He didn't look back. It made the men even angrier.

"He's eating us up from the inside," the one-eyed man sneered quietly. "Sobriety eats everything." "Drink faster," said the man next to him. "Then he won't notice."

A few laughed. Others looked at Störtebeker. He stood at the bow, letting the sky crash into his forehead. His face bore an expression of weary scorn: the knowledge that any order at sea is a lie, but a lie needed to prevent the knives from speaking too soon.

Towards mid-afternoon, they found a wreck. No story, just a few planks that still acted as if they had a purpose. A barrel floated by, gray with salt, belly up. Joris was gone, but the barrels kept floating. Two men pulled it toward them with grappling hooks. Inside: stale water that looked as if it had already outlived three men. They drank anyway. Afterward, the pressure in their heads was lessened, but the voices inside them were louder.

"Course west, you said," someone grumbled. "West to where? To where? Right into the sun?" "Until someone screams," said Störtebeker.

"I can scream," a young man shouted from aft, trying to laugh. The laughter caught on the railing and slid into the water. No one picked it up.

As dusk came, a shadow passed through the middle of the ship: the thought that no one dared to speak and everyone thought.*When the captain no longer knows where the prey is, he is just a man with a knife.*And they all had knives.

They sat around the open box of rusk slices, which looked like bones without meat. Everyone took two, some three, and acted as if justice were a dough to be shared. "Back," Bone Man hissed when one of them stretched out his fingers. The man pulled them back as if the box had hissed.

“We need a goal,” the one-eyed man said, more loudly than one should be for an opinion. Perhaps to hear how his voice sounded in the air. “We need*prey*, Klaus. Not stories."

Störtebeker raised his head. His gaze was calm, too calm. "Prey lies where there's fear," he said. "I smell it. I always smell it. Today I smell you, you dogs. And you smell of fear."

"Fear is not our enemy," the one-eyed man replied. "Hunger is. Water is. A captain who just yells at the sea is." A few nodded. A few pretended to check ropes.

Bone Man briefly let go of the oar, took two steps forward, and his shadow settled on the chest like a hand. "No council here," he said. "No council, no vote. We're not fine gentlemen in hats. We're dirt that floats because it's too tough to sink."

"Dirt also votes," the one-eyed man murmured, barely audible. But the words had teeth. They bit into the night.

Störtebeker stepped forward. Not quickly, not with drama. He simply stood where everyone had to see him. "You want to vote?" he asked. "Good. We vote. We vote for who will stand watch today, who will mend the sails, who will scrub the latrines. And tomorrow we'll vote for who hangs as soon as the Hanseatic League finds us. Does that feel better?" He pointed to the horizon, which was a dirty line between black and black. "Out there are men who can read maps and own houses. They have laws and clean words. And they'll hang us on those clean words until we can't breathe anymore. Do you want to vote for which knot looks prettier?"

The men moved as if they had sand in their joints. A greedy glance darted back and forth between three of them. It was the look that counts: not courage or cowardice, but the arithmetic of the poor.*How many are we, how many are they, what is the skeleton man doing, how quickly does Klaus draw his knife?*

As the sun finally died, the night began to scream. Not loudly—only within them. Someone began to whisper, behind the galley, where the wood was still black from the last burn. Two voices, then three. Whispering is like mold: once there, it grows if no one scratches.

The boy heard it first. He stood by the companionway and pretended to listen to the sea. In truth, he heard the hissing of the rat-people. He looked at Störtebeker, who was roaring at the stars with a look that demanded they come closer. Then the boy walked quietly, as one walks towards a dog that will bite if awakened. "Captain."

Störtebeker didn't immediately turn his head. "Hmm." "Behind the galley. They're counting knives."

"Everyone counts their knife," said Klaus, letting the sentence hang like a fish on a line. "But who counts men?"

"Three," said the boy. "Maybe four if one of them drinks courage."

Bone Man was already on his way, and no one had seen him leave. He stood in the shadows, where voices wouldn't even notice they were being heard. "Tonight?" "Tonight," someone hissed. "When he's standing at the bow again, insulting the moon. One from the left, one from the right, one from behind. Bone Man will be late when he realizes he's early."

There was something funny about how men believe that plans make them smarter than the world. There was something sad about how the world just barks and eats.

"Get them out," said Störtebeker when Bone Man stood beside him again. Nothing more. No anger, no smile.

Bone Man didn't get it out. He went behind the galley, remained in the darkness, waited until three shadows had put their heads close together, until the knife blades impatiently drank in the light once. Then he grabbed the first man by the shoulder and pulled him out, as easily as if the man were just a wet sack. The second jumped backward, hit his back on the side of the ship, and dropped the blade. The third froze—that moment when men learn how heavy their own blood is, even before it flows.

"For a walk," said Bone Man. "To the captain."

You can hear a deck creak when guilt is thrown at it. The three of them were pushed into the circle that forms naturally when fate is at work. One was the one-eyed one. Of course. One was the thin one, the one who thought he could scream. The third was nobody, and that was the worst thing you could be.

Störtebeker looked at them as if they were three waves lapping at the railing. "What is a captain?" he asked the group. The question made the night blink.

No one answered.

"A captain is the place where the knife stops wandering," he said. "The place where the ship stops obeying every direction. I didn't want to be that place. But I am. Because you want it, if you're honest. Because you need it. You need someone to hate when the wind doesn't like you."

"We need prey," the one-eyed man pressed out. Defiance. Hunger. Stupidity. All in one voice.

“Then you would have bet less yesterday,” said Störtebeker.

A hoarse laughter somewhere in the back. Smothered so quickly that you couldn't tell if it was really there.

"Three knives, three mouths," Störtebeker continued. "I like simple math." He nodded. "Take the blades off their belts. Keep your hands on them. Today."

Bone Man drew. The sound of steel entering the light is beautiful when you're not the one who has to wield it. He handed the knives to Störtebeker, who took them, didn't check, and tucked all three into his belt. It looked as if he had three new teeth.

"Now," he said, "let's talk about trust. Trust is when you sleep even though I'm awake. Trust is when I sleep even though you're awake. Today you'll sleep next to me." He pointed to a spot on the deck, just forward of the bow, where the wind blew and the salt stung your eyes. "Here. No blankets. No water. Until the sun has had its fill of you. And if one of you leaves, they go overboard."

"That's not a punishment," hissed the thin man, courage foaming from his mouth. "That's right," said Störtebeker. "The punishment will come later, if you try again."

The one-eyed man raised his head one last time, that puny shred of pride men hold aloft when the rope is already in sight. "You can't slaughter us all, Klaus."

"I don't have to," said Störtebeker. "Hunger will take care of half. The Hanseatic League will take care of the rest."

They lay down, the three of them, stiff as boards, their faces contorted as if they were lying on fire. The wind began to count their teeth. The rest of the crew slowly dispersed, that humiliating departure after a lost performance. One whistled, off-key. One grumbled. One patted the boy on the shoulder, accidentally too hard, intentionally too gently.

Later, as the stars hung above them like cold nails, two more men sat down next to Störtebeker, uninvited. Not loyalty, but rather a need not to freeze alone when the air tasted of iron. "Klaus," said the older of the two, "we have to find something tomorrow. Otherwise, this whole thing will start all over again."

"It always starts all over again," said Störtebeker. "That's why we drink." "Then bring us the jug."

"The jug is the next thing you hate after me," said Störtebeker. "And both keep you warm."

Around midnight, the wind came. Not a good one, but a wind. The sails took it in, as suspiciously as one welcomes an old enemy through the door. The ship pulled, and the spray slapped them in the face, as if to say:*Move, you idiots, I'll do the rest.*

Störtebeker stood, rolled his shoulders, and looked in the direction that is all directions when you have no destination. "Tomorrow," he said, more to the wood than to the men, "I'll smell oak resin and wet sacks. Korn. Maybe beer. Maybe fear. We're cutting something from the world that's still soft."

“And if not?” asked the younger man next to him.

"Then it will be tough," said Störtebeker. "And so will we."

Behind them, the crew breathed like an animal with many lungs. Ahead of them lay a battle with the horizon that no one had yet won. The three at the bow shivered in silence, the wind taking away a few thoughts they would later miss. Bone Man held the rudder with the tenderness of a man who holds on to things that cannot be held.

The captain, who never wanted to be one, stood where water turns to night, and knew: Tomorrow, someone would once again believe they could change the world with three knives. And tomorrow, he would once again explain to them why a knife only reaches as far as the hand holding it—and why hands freeze when they're empty for too long.

The morning brought no peace. It brought the screeching of seagulls circling the boat like vultures around a dead horse, and the flickering eyes of men who had eaten nothing but salt and rum for too long. The deck was damp, the sails heavy, the air smelled of iron.

Störtebeker stood on the mast, his hands clasped, his knife at his belt. He didn't look at the men, but they knew he saw them. A captain didn't have to look to see. A captain was a shadow, always hanging nearby, like a gallows post over a city.

The three who had lain on the bow during the night were still there. Stiff, their lips blue, their eyes sunken. They were alive, but only just, and their faces told of how they had begged the sea for mercy—and received no answer. Störtebeker didn't look at them. He didn't have to. They knew that from now on, they were already half dead.

Bone Man stomped across the deck, heavy but never clumsy. In his hand was a piece of bread so hard it was more stone than food. He broke it in two without effort and threw it at the feet of one of the three. "Eat," he growled. The man grabbed it greedily, bit into it, and the biscuit splintered in his mouth like shards. He bled immediately. But he ate anyway. Hunger doesn't care about teeth.

"Captain!" someone suddenly shouted from the crowd. It was the youngest of them all, thin, freckled, with a voice not yet broken enough to be taken seriously here. But he shouted loudly, too loudly, and the men turned to him. "We need loot. We need something now, or else... or else—"

"Or what?" Störtebeker turned his head. Only slowly, just a little. But it was enough. The air stood still. "Or you'll mutiny?"

The boy swallowed, trying to say something, but his voice was gone. One of the older men laughed hoarsely. "He's not mutinying, Captain. He's just shitting his pants."

Laughter, short, bitter. But beneath the laughter lay something else. There was truth beneath it. Truth that was more dangerous than any knife.

Störtebeker stepped forward. His beard was matted, his eyes tired, but his grin was sharp. "You want prey? Good. Then prick up your damn eyes. It's out there. Always. But prey doesn't come when you yowl like dogs. Prey comes when you howl like wolves."

"And if none come?" The one-eyed man. Of course him. His voice was stinging, and he knew it. "Then we keep drinking? Then we wait until the wind forgets us?"

The murmuring began. A low rumble that rolled across the planks. Men looked at each other, their hands sliding into daggers, unconsciously, like reflexes. No blades outside, not now, but you could see it in the movements: the constant counting, the constant weighing. Who would stand when it started? Who would fall?

Bone Man remained at the helm. He said nothing. But his gaze slowly wandered over the faces, and everyone he met immediately looked away.

The boy—the one with the scratch on his temple—still stood silently at the railing. He didn't speak, he barely moved. But he was there. And his mere presence made the men uneasy. He was proof that one could defy Störtebeker—and survive. And that was dangerous.

"I tell you," snarled the one-eyed man, "a captain who doesn't know where he's sailing isn't a captain. He's just the biggest drunk on board."

That was the moment. Everyone held their breath. The men waited for the answer. Not because they were curious, but because they knew someone was about to die.

Störtebeker stepped forward, slowly, his steps heavy but sure. He now stood directly in front of the one-eyed man, so close that he could smell his breath – rum, salt, blood. His grin was thin. "Biggest drunk, huh?"

The one-eyed man held his gaze. He was stupid enough to hold on, and smart enough to know he couldn't take anything back now.

“Then drink with me,” said Störtebeker.

The men remained silent. There was no innkeeper here, no barrel, no jug. But the red bastard pulled a bottle from under his coat—rum, dark, thick, like tar. He ripped off the cork, took a long, deep drag. Then he held it out to the one-eyed man.

The man took it, hesitated. Everyone stared. He drank, coughed, almost choked. But he drank. He wiped his mouth, handed the bottle back.

Störtebeker laughed, loudly and angrily. "See, dog? You can't even drink. How are you going to sail then?"

Laughter, more honest this time, but more dangerous. The deck was full of tension, like a rope about to snap.

"Captain," Bone Man murmured from the helm. No threat, no warning. Just a word, heavy as lead.

Störtebeker looked at him briefly, then at the one-eyed man. He grinned. "Not today." He put the bottle away and turned away. "But remember, dog: tomorrow might be different."

The murmuring died down. The men dispersed, pretending to be working. But their eyes were dark. The seed had been sown.

Störtebeker leaned against the railing, his hands clasped, his gaze fixed on the sea. He hated her. He hated them all. But he knew: without her, he was nothing. Just a man with a knife and a thirst. And the sea doesn't care about men with knives and a thirst.

The night smelled of sweat, fear, and bad rum. The sky was clear, the stars stared coldly down, as if they wanted to watch rats tear each other apart. It was the kind of sky under which men thought they were immortal, simply because the night was big and black enough to swallow their stupidity.

The crew had gathered on the middeck. Not officially, not as a council, but when ten men stand together, whispering, their hands resting on knife handles, that's as good as a council—a council of wolves who want to test the lead dog.

The one-eyed man stood at the front again. His face was pale, but his eye was burning. "Enough, Klaus!" he cried. "Enough talk, enough rum, enough of your grinning. We need more than stories. We need a captain who will lead us, not one who threatens us!"

Murmurs. Agreeable. Cautious. Like rain before it turns into a storm.

Störtebeker stepped out of the darkness. Not in a hurry, not with noise. He simply stepped, and the silence came of its own accord. His shirt was open, the scar across his chest gleamed in the lantern light. He didn't have the knife in his hand—not yet.

"You need a captain?" His voice was quiet, but it had a bite. "Good. But a captain isn't a storyteller. A captain is the bastard left behind when the cowards vomit and the brave bleed to death. A captain is the one who draws the knife first and wipes it last. That's all."

"You're not a captain!" The one-eyed man stepped forward and spat on the planks. "You're just the biggest dog in the pack. And dogs die when the pack decides."

That was it. The sentence everyone had been waiting for. Knives flashed. Not many, but enough to cut the air. Bone Man stepped away from the helm, slowly, like a wall that suddenly grew legs. The boy at the railing tensed, his gaze darting between the men, like a bird that can't find a nest.

"So let's go," said Störtebeker, drawing his knife. Finally. The blade song everyone wanted to hear. "Which of you wants it first? One? Two? Or all of you?"

The men hesitated. Hesitation was dangerous. Hesitation meant blood. But hesitation came because everyone knew what could happen: One would rush forward, one would fall, and the rest would have to continue until only the dead remained.

Then a man stepped forward. Not the one-eyed man. One of the older ones, with a gray beard, who had bet against the gallows too many times. "Klaus," he said, in a voice that had nothing left to lose. "We don't want your blood. We want loot. Show us that you know where it is. Show us that you're not leading us into the void."

A brief jolt went through the crowd. Yes. Loot. That was the word everyone was looking for. Not blood, not rum, not stories. Loot.

Störtebeker laughed. It was a harsh, ugly laugh that echoed through the masts. "Prey? You want prey?" He pointed to the sea, black and endless. "It's out there. But prey doesn't swim into your mouths on its own. You get prey, with teeth, with courage, with blood. And if you don't have courage, then you don't need prey!"

The one-eyed man growled and raised his knife. "Then we'll get your prey, bastard."

The knife glittered in Störtebeker's hand. "Try it."

The air crackled. One man moved, then two. The mutiny was on a knife edge. Knochenmann stepped forward and stood beside Störtebeker. His hand rested on the club that had already blasted more skulls than words. No speech, no scream. Only his stature, which said:*Those who dare will die faster than they blink.*

That was enough. For the moment.

The men stepped back, grumbling, their knives still out, but uncertain. They knew two against twenty wasn't fair. But they also knew these two weren't playing fair.

"Tomorrow," Störtebeker spat, putting the knife back. "Tomorrow I'll show you my prey. Tomorrow I'll show you why you're still alive. But today—today you put away your accursed knives, or the sea will eat you before you even see the rope."

Slowly, reluctantly, the blades disappeared. The murmuring died down. The men scattered, one by one, like rats noticing that the cat isn't tired yet.

The one-eyed man stopped and stared at Störtebeker. Hatred in his eyes, pure, clear, unbroken. "Tomorrow, Klaus," he said quietly. "Tomorrow we'll see who the dog is."

Störtebeker grinned. "Tomorrow, yes. If you're still breathing by then."

The one-eyed man walked, slowly, without lowering his gaze.

Night fell over the ship again, heavy and oppressive. But the seeds had been sown. Tomorrow, Störtebeker had to deliver. Tomorrow, he had to show that he wasn't just the greatest dog—but the only one who bit when it really counted.

And deep down, he knew: He never wanted to be a captain. But the men would keep making him one until he either died or everything else died.

The morning stank of sweat, old rum, and hope—and hope is worse than hunger because it rots faster. The sun crept over the planks, and the men stared out, greedily, desperately, as if the horizon might throw a roasted pig at them.

Then it came. A sail. First small, like a speck, then larger, brighter, a belly of white cloth proudly billowing against the wind. A merchant ship. You recognized it immediately: clean, upright, bulging with goods, steered by men who thought they were safe because the sea was so vast and empty.

"There!" one yelled, his voice snapping like a rope. "A merchant ship!" another gasped. "Prey!"

The crew raced forward, gaping, eyes shining. Knives flashed, muscles flexed, tongues licked chapped lips. The ship was salvation, meat, bread, beer, gold—all in one.

Störtebeker stepped to the helm. Knochenmann was already standing there, his hands on the rudder, firm as iron. Klaus placed a heavy, familiar hand on his shoulder. "Hold course," he murmured. "We're going to eat today."

The men gathered, their voices rising, a rumble, a roar that would have shaken the sea itself. They shouted as if they were already victors. They forgot hunger, forgot mutiny, forgot everything except the taste of booty that was already on their tongues.

“Captain!” one shouted. “Orders!”

There it was again. The word. Captain. It gnawed at Störtebeker, ate into his bones. He didn't want to be it, he hated it. But if he remained silent now, if he backed away now – he'd be dead before the first blade was drawn.

He raised the knife high, glinting in the sun. "There!" he roared, his voice like thunder. "There's your bread! There's your rum! There are your whores, your gold pieces, your fucking dreams! So go get them!"

A roar like an animal about to break free. Men ran, grabbing grappling hooks, ropes, and blades. The ship came alive, the creaking of the planks a war howl.

The merchant ship approached. One could see the faces of the men on board—traders, citizens, fine folk who suddenly realized that their clean sails were nothing compared to rats with knives. Panic. Screams. Orders. Too late.

"In with the hooks!" Bone Man yelled, and the ropes shot through the air. Metal crashed into wood, the ships shrank, wood splintered, water splashed.

Then there was chaos.

Störtebeker jumped first. Always. Not because he had to, but because he knew: If he wasn't in front, the men would think he was behind. His knife cut, his grin drew blood. One merchant fell with a scream, another had his throat ripped open before he even knew he was fighting.

The crew raged. It wasn't a fight, it was a slaughter. The pirates, half-starved, half-drunk, slaughtered the merchants like pigs in a market. Screams, blood, bones, the deck was soon more red than brown.

The one-eyed man fought like a madman. He wanted to prove he was more than just a mouth. His knife found backs, arms, faces. He grinned, bloody, mad. For a moment, he was almost beautiful, because hatred made him shine.

The boy—the one without a name—fought too. He wasn't strong, wasn't experienced. But he was sober. And sobriety is a weapon when everyone else is blind. He dodged, stabbed, and his knife struck home. One merchant fell, another staggered. The boy stopped. And the men saw it. And that made him dangerous.

Störtebeker roared, stabbed, and struck. He was everywhere, his knife singing, his laughter cutting through the noise. He hated it. He loved it. It was the only thing he knew how to do. Kill, drink, scream.

At the end, it was silent. The merchant ship was a slaughterhouse. Blood dripped through the cracks, bodies lay like garbage, the sea swallowed them greedily. The pirates stood there, panting, sweating, laughing, drinking. Their hands dripped, their eyes burned.

“Prey!” one shouted. “Prey!”

They found barrels of beer, sacks of grain, crates of cloth, coins, anything that glittered, anything they could touch. They laughed, cried, and fell upon one another as if they had plundered the heavens.

Störtebeker stood at the bow, looking out. His beard was sticky, his hands were dripping, his grin was thin. He had delivered. He was the captain. Whether he wanted to be or not.

Bone Man stepped beside him, his axe still bloody. "They're following you now. But tomorrow they'll want more."

“Tomorrow,” Klaus murmured, “they’ll always want more.”

And he knew it would never be enough. Not for her. Not for him. Not for anyone.

The deck of the merchant ship stank of death, but the men only smelled the rum. They plundered, ripped, stuffed, each taking what they could carry, what they wanted to carry, what they could take from the next person. It was a scavenging, not a sharing. Barrels rolled over planks, crates crashed open, coins jumped, cloths fluttered in the wind like flags of loot.

They laughed, screamed, and sang. Blood was on their hands, but they shoveled anyway. The sea was red, the seagulls screeched, and the sun smiled as if it had never seen anything else.

Störtebeker stood at the sidelines, watching. He drank, of course, but he didn't drink as much as the others. He knew: after the battle comes the mutiny. Always. Every victory brought more greed than joy. Every sip of rum brought more mistrust than courage.

"This is mine!" one yelled, snatching a bag of coins from another's fingers. "Screw it, it all belongs to us!" a second shrieked. "Us? Or yours?" a third snarled. Knives flashed. Again.

Bone Man stepped between them and rammed his club into the planks. "Back, dogs!" His look alone froze two men. But there were too many of them, too greedy. The club alone was no longer enough.

Störtebeker raised his cup. "Stop whining, you idiots!" His voice cut through the shouting. "You want everything? You'll get nothing. Everything you have belongs to the ship. The ship, damn it, or the sea will eat you before you even get to the rope!"

"The ship?" sneered the one-eyed man, his face red with blood, his eyes greedy as a rat. "Or you, Klaus? Everything always belongs to you, doesn't it?"

That murmuring again. That dangerous, fermenting murmuring that spread like poison. Men nodded, hesitated, glanced.

Störtebeker stepped forward, his knife in his hand, but not raised. "Me? Do you really believe me? Look at you. Each of you drinks more than you eat. Each of you fucks faster than you fight. I'm not your king, I'm just the bastard who's still standing when you're already down. That's the difference."

"A bastard, yes!" cried the one-eyed man. "A bastard who takes everything!"

The air crackled. It was almost time. Again.

Then the boy stepped forward. The one without a name. Covered in blood, but sober, his eyes clear. "He's right," he said. "Without him, we would have nothing. Without him, we would be dead. You're afraid of him, and rightly so. Because you need him."

Silence. Heavy, piercing.

The one-eyed man growled and spat on the ground. "You're on his side, little one? Because he spared you? You're just his dog!"

The boy looked at him. "Better his dog than your carrion."

Laughter. Loud, filthy. Some laughed genuinely, others laughed because they didn't know what else to do. But the laughter broke the spell, for the moment.

Störtebeker stepped beside the boy and briefly placed his hand on his shoulder. Not in a friendly way, not affectionately. More like a man pointing:*This one lives because I say so.*

"Let's share," he said, loudly and clearly. "All in one pile. Everyone gets their share. Whoever wants more gets my knife in the face. It's that simple."

The men grumbled, but they nodded. They gathered the loot, stacked it, and divided it. Not fairly, never fairly, but enough so that no one immediately drew a knife.

Night came. They drank, sang, and fell upon one another. Some fucked, others vomited, and still others slept amidst the chaos. The ship rocked, the planks creaked, and the sea laughed.

Störtebeker sat alone, cup in hand, knife at his belt. He hated her. He hated her greed, her cowardice, her damned stupidity. But he knew: without her, he was nothing. Just a man with a knife and a thirst.

Bone Man approached him and sat down heavily. "You're keeping them together." "I'm not keeping them together. I'm just keeping them from killing each other faster." "That's the same thing."

Störtebeker grinned. "Maybe. But eventually they'll do it anyway. And then I'll be standing here alone with you. And then?"

Bone Man drank, said nothing.

The sea roared, the men yelled, and somewhere a seagull screeched, as if it knew that tomorrow one of them would go overboard again.

Night settled over the ships like a wet sack. The moon grinned palely, the stars sparkled like nails in a coffin lid. The "Bunte Kuh" was laden with booty, yet the mood was heavier than before. Gold, grain, rum—everything on board. But none of it satisfied greed.

The men sat in small groups. Some were gambling for coins, others were fighting over pieces of bread, and still others were lying on their backs, staring at the sky and cursing their lives. The deck smelled of blood, sweat, beer, and hatred.

The one-eyed man crouched with three others, his voice deep, his eyes sparkling. "He's shown you, yes. But for how long? Today he brings us prey, tomorrow he brings us the rope. You know him. He doesn't think about us. He thinks only of himself. We're just his meat, which he throws into the sea when it suits him."

"And then what?" one growled. "We followed him today, and we won. You want to throw him overboard tomorrow?" "Perhaps." The one-eyed man grinned, crookedly, maliciously. "Perhaps soon. A man like him doesn't die in bed. A man like him dies by knife. Better our knife than the Hanseatic League's."

The men nodded, uncertain, but nodded. Poisonous thoughts grow quietly in the dark, like mushrooms.

At the other end of the deck sat Störtebeker. Cup in hand, knife beside him, eyes on the sky. He seemed distracted, but he heard everything. Always. Every sentence, every whisper. The boy stood beside him, silent, like a shadow too young to be tired.

"They're whispering again," said the boy. "Let them. Whispering doesn't kill anyone. Knives do." "And what if the knives follow soon?" Störtebeker grinned narrowly. "Then blood will flow again. That's how it always goes."

The night grew louder. Dice clacked, voices grew shrill. One lost, slammed on the table, and drew his knife. The other was faster. A stab, a scream, blood on the dice. No one intervened. They watched, drank, and laughed. The dead man was thrown overboard, without a prayer, without a name. The sea swallowed him, greedily, silently.

"One less," muttered Knochenmann. He suddenly stood next to Störtebeker, as always, as if he were made from the shadow itself. "That saves bread." "Bread doesn't eat hate," growled Störtebeker. "Hatred grows, no matter how full they are."

At the edge of the deck, another fight broke out. Two men were wrestling over a coin that one had taken too many. They shouted, pushed, and hit. Others

cheered them on as if it were a game. One fell, the other stabbed. Blood spurted, men cheered. The dead man was sent to the fish.

“One more,” murmured the boy. “Many more,” said Klaus.

Then the one-eyed man came. He stepped into the middle of the deck, raised his cup, and roared loudly: "To the captain!"

The men looked up. Silence, suddenly. All eyes on him. The one-eyed man grinned. "To the captain who brings us loot, yes. But also to the captain who will lead us to our doom tomorrow!"

Murmuring. Louder. Sharper. Like a growing storm.

"We follow him because he scares us!" cried the one-eyed man. "But what good does fear do us? Fear doesn't fill stomachs! Fear doesn't make coins!"

"He brought us prey!" the boy suddenly shouted, loudly and clearly. Everyone turned to him. His voice cut like a knife. "Today you live because he led you! Today you eat because he led you! And you want to overthrow him? You fools!"

Silence. Hard, sharp.

Störtebeker stood up, slowly, his eyes dark. "You're right, boy." He stepped forward, into the middle of the circle, facing the one-eyed man. "They live because I want them to. And you, dog, you only live because I want them to."

The knife flashed. A quick, brutal throw. It pierced the plank, an inch from the one-eyed man's foot. The man froze, his eye wide open.

"The next one's stuck in your throat," growled Störtebeker. "And every one of you knows I'll do it if you force me. So choose, dogs. Choose: a captain you fear—or no captain at all. And without a captain, you'll be dead faster than you can raise the next cup."

The men murmured. Some nodded, others looked away. The one-eyed man growled, but remained silent. He pulled the knife from the plank and pressed it into Störtebeker's hand. Slowly. Humiliatingly.

Störtebeker grinned. "Good."

The night consumed the rest. They continued drinking, fighting, fucking, and puking. But this time the knives stuck.

Bone Man looked at Störtebeker. "You're their captain. Whether you like it or not." "I don't want to." "The sea doesn't want to ask."

And Klaus knew: every victory was just a breath before the next mutiny.

Morning didn't come quietly. It came with the screeching of seagulls circling above the two ships, as if they knew that meat would soon be available again. The sea was calm, almost too friendly, and that was precisely what made the men nervous. A calm sea always meant something was churning in their bellies.

The crew awoke scattered, battered, with sticky faces and sticky hands. Some crawled out of barrels, others lay semi-conscious between ropes. The deck was a battlefield of smashed stones, bloodstains, and emptied jugs.

Störtebeker was already sitting, upright, awake, his cup in his hand. But the cup was empty. His eyes were red, not from sleep, but from drinking. Beside him was Knochenmann, silent, immobile, a rock in the stinking storm.

“Captain,” mumbled one, still half drunk, “what now?”

The word cut through the air. Again. Captain. Always that damned word. Störtebeker hated it. But he knew: It was all that held the men together. A word. A curse. A noose around his neck, which he himself tightened every time he accepted it.

"Now?" he growled, slowly standing up, raising the cup. "Now you're alive. Because I want it that way. You eat, you drink, you fuck, you gamble – because I brought you prey. But you forget one thing, you dogs: Without me, you're nothing. Just rats in the water. With me, you're afraid. And fear keeps you alive. So eat your fear before it eats you!"

The men looked down, grumbled, nodded. Unconvinced. Never convinced. But quiet enough that knives didn't fly. For now.

The one-eyed man stood at the back again, his gaze boring into Störtebeker. Hatred, pure, clear, undisguised. But he remained silent. Still.

Störtebeker stepped to the middle of the deck, broad-shouldered, his hands on his belt, his knife visible but not out. "Listen, dogs. You think I want to be your captain. I don't want to. I want to drink, fuck, laugh, die—like all of you. But

someone has to be at the front when the Hanseatic League comes. Someone has to bleed first so you can drink afterward. And that someone is me. Not because I want to. Because you're too cowardly."

Silence. Only the creaking of the planks, the flapping of the sails.

"You think you hate me," he continued. "But you need me. Because I am your hatred. Your hatred holds you together. Without me, you will tear each other apart in one night. You are wolves, but wolves need a target. So take me. Hate me. Follow me. But don't you dare throw me down—for then the sea will tear you apart before you can scream a name."

He looked at them all, one after the other. Everyone backed away, one after the other. No one held their gaze. Not even the one-eyed man.

Then he raised the cup and tipped the rest—just water, but no one saw. He let it run over his beard and laughed, loud, sharp, ugly. "To the prey, you bastards! To the sea! To fear!"

A roar answered. Not jubilation, not joy—more like the roar of animals who know they're still alive, and that's enough. For today.

Bone Man stepped beside him, quietly, as always. "You're their captain. Not because you want to be. Because they need it."

Störtebeker grinned, tired and bitter. "Then they'll need me until I'm hanging out of their mouths, vomited up."

The boy stood behind him, silent, his eyes clear. He knew: Today, Klaus had tamed them. But tomorrow they would be greedy again. Tomorrow they would whisper again. Tomorrow blood would flow again.

And Störtebeker knew it too. He wasn't a captain. He was a noose that the men themselves placed around their necks—and that they would put on him when the sea had tired of them.

Storm hairstyle and man overboard

The sky began quietly. Not with a clap of thunder, not with a wave washing over the deck. No – with silence. That unnatural, nasty silence when the sea holds its breath before raising its fist.

Störtebeker stood at the bow, cup in hand, half empty, half full—as always. He stared into the gray expanse. The blue of the sky ate into the black, clouds grew like rotten ulcers, and the seagulls disappeared. When the seagulls disappear, everyone knows what's coming.

"Something's brewing," Bone Man murmured, his hands on the oar, motionless as a statue. He didn't have to say it. Everyone felt it. The wind was no longer wind—it was a breath that stood still, only to roar again.

The crew was restless. Men ran across the deck, shouting at each other, throwing ropes, checking sails, but their hands trembled. Pirates feared little—knives, rum, rope, all of that was part of everyday life. But a storm? A storm was proof that no man, no captain, no bastard, commanded the sea.

The one-eyed man stood in the middle of the deck, his gaze upward, his mouth tight. "That's not wind," he muttered loudly enough for everyone to hear. "That's the sea, and it's sick of us."

A murmur, like waves, swept through the crew. They cursed, laughed nervously, but no one objected.

Störtebeker turned his head, his grin narrow and evil. "The sea only eats weaklings, dog. So shut up and get to work."

A growl from the crowd, but no one stepped forward. Not today. Today the sea was the enemy, and everyone knew that a knife was as useful against a wave as a fart in a storm.

The sky continued to darken. The first drops fell, heavy, thick, cold. They hit like stones. The wood creaked, the sails flapped. Then came the first gust of wind—a blow that tossed the ship sideways. Men stumbled, cursed, and clung to ropes. One almost slipped, another pulled him back. No casualties yet. Not yet.

"Tie down!" Störtebeker roared, his voice like a clap of thunder above the rumbling. "Tie down everything, or you'll be washed overboard!"

The men ran, tied, and pulled, their hands sore, their throats dry. The sea laughed, the first waves lashed, high, salty, and cold. Water splashed across the deck, the ship creaked as if it were breaking.

The boy clung to a rope, his eyes wide but clear. He was trembling, yes, but he was standing. And the men saw it. They saw that he wasn't screaming, wasn't begging, wasn't cursing. And again, that made him dangerous.

"This is just the beginning!" Bone Man yelled from the helm. "The devil is yet to come!"

And he came. The sky opened, lightning devoured the clouds, thunder roared like an angry god. The wind lashed, the waves crashed. The "Colorful Cow" became a toy, thrown, pushed, and beaten. Men screamed, sails ripped, ropes snapped.

Störtebeker held onto the mast, laughed, yes, laughed, his hair whipped, his beard sticky, and he roared into the storm: "Come on, you whore! Show us what you can do! I'm still standing, you bitch!"

The men stared at him, horrified, angry, fascinated. He laughed at the storm. He laughed at death. And that was precisely what made him a captain, whether he wanted it or not.

The wind was no longer wind. It was a beast, gripping the ship and shaking it until its bones cracked. Every breath was a struggle, every word a scream against the howling that raged through the masts like a thousand demons.

The "Bunte Kuh" groaned and moaned as if she herself felt pain. The wood splintered, nails cracked, ropes lashed like snakes. Water cascaded over the deck, ice-cold and hard, a blow that threw men to the planks as if they were nothing.

"Hold the rudder!" Störtebeker yelled, but Knochenmann didn't need to hear it. He stood there, legs apart, his hands gripping the steering beam, immobile, as if he had been carved into the mast. Every thrust, every wave tore at him, but he held on. His eyes were narrow, calm, while the world crumbled around him.

The boy clung to a rope, his fingers white, his lips blue. A wave crashed over him, half-pulling him free, but he gritted his teeth. He didn't look at Störtebeker. But Klaus saw him—and in that look there was more defiance than one could expect from a boy.

Then came the first scream. High, shrill, desperate. A man—Hinnerk, one of the Bremen men—lost his footing. A wave swept him up, hurling him over the railing. For a moment, he was seen floating, his arms flailing, his mouth open. Then he disappeared into the darkness.

"Man overboard!" someone shouted, and everyone looked out. But it was useless. No rope, no lifebelt. Just water, black and deep. One life lost.

"Back to the rope!" Störtebeker roared, his voice tearing through the wind. "No one follows! No one!"

Some cursed, some prayed, but no one moved. Everyone knew: whoever jumped would die.

Another wave crashed. Two men fell to the ground, slipped, struggled, and made it back. One didn't. Another scream, another figure in the water, another nothing.

The crew began to tremble. Fear crept into their bones, stronger than rum, stronger than blood. They looked at each other – and they saw the truth: The sea was the only captain here.

The one-eyed man grabbed a rope and yelled against the storm: "See, Klaus? Your knife's no good here! Your laughter's no good! The sea will fuck you and us along with it!"

Some nodded, out of fear, not courage. Words are light when waves are heavy.

Störtebeker laughed. Yes, he laughed, his hair splashing wetly against his face, his beard dripping salt. "Fuck me, you one-eyed man! Fuck me, sea! But I'm still standing! And he who stands, lives! So stand up, you dogs, or drown!"

He grabbed a rope, pulled, and helped two men up who were already halfway down. Blood was running from his forehead, but he was grinning. That grin that didn't conquer, but survived.

And the men saw it. Between fear and madness, there was someone who didn't kneel, who didn't pray, who didn't whimper. Someone who spat into the mouth of the storm.

Lightning ripped through the sky, striking the water so close that the deck shook. Some screamed, threw themselves to the ground, others cursed.

The boy was still standing, his rope in his grasp. His eyes were dark but clear. He didn't look away.

"The sea takes whoever it wants!" Bone Man suddenly roared, his voice deep as thunder. "So shut up and fight while you can breathe!"

And they did. They tied sails, they pulled ropes, they screamed, they cursed. Every move was a fight for survival, every breath a gamble.

But they did it. Not for themselves. Not for Störtebeker. But because the storm left them no choice.

The storm had now brought out its whip. The waves were no longer waves—they were mountains of water, rolling in like collapsing cathedrals. Every impact made the ship shake, as if the sea were trying to tear the bones from the hull.

The men screamed, cursed, and clung to each other. Some prayed, others laughed hysterically, because they already knew that no prayer can mend a sail.

A rope snapped, whipping through the air. It caught a sailor by the neck, he gasped, fell, and before anyone could help, the next wave was upon him, swept him away like a piece of dirt. No one shouted "man overboard" anymore. The screams were too many, the sea too greedy.

The boy was still hanging from the same rope. His fingers were bloody, his skin was tearing, his nails were breaking. But he didn't let go. He bit through, like a dog that would rather lose its teeth than its throat. Störtebeker saw him—and somewhere inside him, a dark smile grew:*Maybe that kid has more balls than half the crew.*

“The ship is breaking!” someone shouted. “The masts are splintering!”

It was true. Wood creaked, nailed, splintered.*Colorful cow*It was old and tough, but no ship lasts forever. The water rushed over the deck, sweeping away barrels, crates, and bodies. The ship creaked as if it were screaming itself.

And there was the one-eyed man. He had struggled to the middle deck, wet, panting, his eyes blazing with hatred. He grabbed a rope, held on tight, and yelled into the wind: "Don't you see? Klaus is leading us to the grave! The sea wants him, not us! Throw him overboard – and the storm will stop!"

His voice cut through the howling like poison through water. And some heard it. Too many.

"He's right!" shouted one, half-mad, half-drunk. "The sea wants blood!"
"Sacrifice him!" shrieked another. "Sacrifice the captain!"

A few knives flashed. Even in the storm. Even when every breath could be their last, they found time to nurture their hatred.

Störtebeker stood at the mast, his hair whipping, his face wet, his grin wide. "Sacrifice me? You dogs! The sea wants more than one! The sea wants all of you! But if you think it'll stop if I go—then I'll jump voluntarily!"

He spread his arms as if he really wanted to jump into the water. A laugh, rough, wild, unbroken.

The men stared. Some paused, others hesitated. That was it. His laughter. His madness. They couldn't sacrifice him—not when he himself was ready.

But the one-eyed man continued to roar: "Cowards! You let him tear you apart! He's not a captain, he's the noose around your neck!"

The knife glittered in his hand. He stepped forward, against the storm, against the water, against everything. He wanted to stab Störtebeker himself.

There was Bone Man. A shadow of wood and blood. He stood between them, his club in his hand, his gaze cold. Not a word. Not a threat. Just a look.

And the one-eyed man stopped. For a heartbeat. For two. Then the next wave ripped up the deck, and everyone stumbled, fell, and clung. The moment shattered into chaos.

But the poison was there. The poison remained.

"The sea demands sacrifice!" someone shouted. "Then let it take whomever it wants!" roared Störtebeker, his voice like thunder, his knife raised. "But not from my hand!"

A wave crashed over them, swept two men away, and swept them into the depths. Screams, bubbles, then silence. Victims enough. For now.

The ship rocked and groaned, but it held. For now. And the men were no longer screaming "Sacrifice him." They were only screaming to survive.

The storm was tired of playing games. It had flexed its muscles, swept men into the water, and swallowed screams—now it wanted to break blood, wood, and bone.

The*Colorful cow*reared up, crashing back into the sea like a beached whale. The wood splintered, planks bent, nails cracked. Every thud of the waves sounded as if the ship itself were wheezing, just before its last breath.

"The masts!" someone yelled. And he was right. The sails were in tatters, flapping like chewed rags, and the masts creaked under the force of the wind. Every gust made them crack as if they were about to break.

"Down with the sails!" Bone Man yelled. His voice was a command, not a plea. Men climbed, slid, and clung to wet ropes. One fell, crashed to the deck, and remained silent. Another hung in the lines like a wet sack, and the next flash of lightning showed his face—shattered, empty.

Störtebeker stood in the middle of the deck, legs wide apart, the knife still at his hip, as if he were about to slit the sky's throat. His hair whipped across his face, his beard was wet, and he laughed. He laughed the way only a man laughs who knows he's already lost—and that's precisely why he has nothing left to lose.

"Come on, you bastard!" he yelled into the gusts. "Knock me down if you can! But I'm not falling! Do you hear me? I'm not falling!"

Several men stared at him, half horrified, half fascinated. One whispered, "He's insane..." Another, "Or the only one left alive."

There was a crash. A mast, the front one, broke. It splintered, toppled, and fell with a screeching groan, taking ropes, men, and timber with it. The impact was like thunder, the deck shook, the men screamed. Two were crushed, one was pulled overboard. Only a final gurgling sound was heard, then he, too, was gone.

"Man overboard!" someone shouted – this time again. But the voices were hollow. No one dared to attempt a rescue. Not in a storm. Not when every move could be the last straw.

The boy was still hanging from his rope. His face was pale, blood and salt clinging to it. But he stood. He stood, while men twice his age had long since drowned. And Störtebeker saw it—and laughed even louder.

"Look at him, you dogs!" he roared, pointing at the boy. "Half your size, and he can take more than your drunken faces! Shame on you, you rats! Shame on you!"

Some cursed, others looked away. The one-eyed man gritted his teeth, his gaze burning. But he remained silent. Even he knew: the storm only consumed weakness, and Störtebeker didn't smell weak. Not yet.

The rain lashed, the waves thundered, the deck was a death trap. Men slipped, clung, tore ropes, and shouted prayers that were torn to pieces in the wind. One, a man from Greifswald with a beard down to his belly, lost his footing. A wave grabbed him, yanked him up, and hurled him overboard. Only a scream, then silence. The sea collected victims like coins.

"The sea takes whomever it wants!" roared Störtebeker. "But not me! Do you hear me? Not me!"

And he stood there, grinning, laughing, while men around him died like flies. He wasn't stronger, not better—just too stubborn to let go. And that's exactly what made him a captain, whether he wanted it or not.

The storm raged, the ship creaked, men screamed, Bone Man held the rudder as if trying to tame it with his bare hands. And in the middle of it all stood Klaus, legs wide apart, laughing, a bastard with salt in his beard and madness in his eyes.

And for a moment, the men truly believed: Maybe he'll hold off the storm. Maybe he'll bite back the sea.

The storm ravaged the night, but eventually, even the sea had had enough. The waves remained high, the water lashed, the rain still pummeled skin like nails – but the madness subsided. The roaring turned into a growl, the howling into a murmur. The sea didn't spit out the "Colorful Cow," but it stopped tearing her apart.

The ship was a heap of rubble. A mast was missing, the sails hung like tattered shirts, ropes lay slack and broken across the deck. Blood, red with rain and salt, clung between the planks. Two men still lay there, what was left of them, crushed flat under splinters. Others had long since disappeared, into the depths, into the silence, into the darkness.

The crew stood scattered, soaking wet, their eyes as empty as empty bottles. No one grinned, no one cursed. They had survived, yes, but that wasn't a victory. That was merely a reprieve.

The boy was still standing. He had never let go of his rope, his hands bloody, his fingers bruised, but he was standing. His gaze was glassy, yet he was awake. He looked at Störtebeker, and there was no begging, no fear—only this dull knowledge:*I did it too.*

Störtebeker nodded to him, barely noticeable, but enough. The men saw it, and some hated the boy for it. Hate was easier than feeling gratitude.

The one-eyed man sat on the planks, panting, his hair sticking to his skin, his eye burning. He had survived, but not won. He knew it, and Klaus knew it too. The storm still hung between them, invisible, but sharper than any knife.

"Count them," Bone Man growled, his voice dry as wood. One stepped forward, mumbling, stammering, walking down the rows. "Eleven... twelve... no, only eleven." Eleven less. Eleven men who had been drinking and cursing that morning, now just salt in the water.

No one prayed. No "God rest their souls," no "Rest in peace." They stood, staring, breathing heavily, and everyone knew: Today there were eleven, tomorrow there could be more. Perhaps they themselves.

"The sea takes its toll," Störtebeker said quietly, his voice burning like rum. "And we pay, whether we want to or not. But we're still standing. And as long as we're standing, the sea belongs to us, not we to it."

A few men nodded. Others spat, others looked away. But no one objected.

Bone Man still held the rudder, even though the storm was abating. His hands were white but firm. He didn't look at Klaus; he didn't have to. They both knew: the sea had given them a reprieve—nothing more.

The night crept on, and at some point, men collapsed, sleeping where they stood, like animals after a hunt. The deck was wet and cold, but no one cared. They were glad they were still breathing.

Störtebeker stopped. The rain pelted, the wind bit, and he was no longer laughing. His gaze was hard, directed inward. He knew what was coming: a fight over loot, over guilt, over power. The storm hadn't broken them—but it had made them thinner. Thin like ropes that snap at the next tug.

He saw the one-eyed man staring. He saw the boy standing there. He saw Bone Man remaining silent. And he knew: the next storm wouldn't come from the sea. The next storm would come from within.

The morning came gray. No sunrise, no glow, no brilliant blue—just a pale light illuminating the dead planks. The sea was smooth, as if it hadn't done anything. A silent bastard washing his hands in the water while the "Bunte Kuh" creaked like a broken rib.

The men woke up like ghosts. Tired, burned out, with eyes that had seen too much. Some still lay where they had fallen, wet, sticky, and stinking. Others crawled across the deck, gathering ropes, mending, without really knowing why.

Eleven less. Eleven names that no one mentioned. No one built crosses, no one sang. Pirates weren't brothers, they were just mouths eating side by side. Whoever died was gone. An empty cup, thrown away.

Störtebeker stood at the mast, arms crossed. He was awake, yes, but his eyes were deeper, darker. He had shouted at the sea, laughed—and survived. But what good did that do? The men still hated him. Perhaps more than ever. Because he was still there. And others weren't.

The boy shuffled across the deck, his hands bound with rags, bloody but firm. He saw the remains, the splinters, the blood. He looked at Klaus, and again there was that nod. Short, hard. A sign:*The two of us did it.*

The one-eyed man sat at the edge, his face hard, his eye like a knife. He was silent, but his silence was poison. The men who were still alive glanced at him. Not openly, not loudly, but enough. There was a ferment again.

"The sea wanted victims," murmured one. "And it took them." "Eleven men," said another. "Eleven who could have still fought." "And who stayed?" growled a third. "That bastard up front laughs when we puke."

Störtebeker heard it. He heard everything. But he remained silent. His teeth ground, his heart pounded. If he spoke now, he would scream again, laugh again, threaten again. But he was tired. The storm had consumed him too, just not his body.

Bone Man approached him, his face made of stone. "They whisper." "Let them. Whispering costs nothing." "Until someone draws the knife." Störtebeker grinned narrowly. "Then I'll draw faster."

The boy approached them, the blood fresh on his fingers. "They say the sea wanted you. Not us. You. And that you betrayed him." "The sea wanted everyone," Klaus growled. "But it only eats the stupid ones first."

The men gathered, bound, and mended. But they talked, nonstop. Every sentence a drop of poison seeping into the wood. The one-eyed man said nothing. He didn't need to say anything. His gaze did it for him.

The "Bunte Kuh" sailed on, slowly, groaning, but she sailed on. The sea was calm, the sun rose hesitantly, but there was no peace. Not in the woods, not in the hearts.

Störtebeker stood at the bow, staring into the distance. He knew: the storm wasn't over. Not really. The sea had merely taken a break. The next one would come. Whether from outside or inside didn't matter.

And he also knew: eleven deaths were just the beginning.

The sea was still. Too still. A surface of gray glass, smooth as a mirror, as if it didn't want to acknowledge the dead still floating beneath it. Not a seagull, not a breath of wind, only the*Colorful cow*, pushing forward like a wounded animal.

The men worked, but without fire. They tied ropes, mended sails, and hauled aside splinters. But every grip was weak, every step dragged. Not from fatigue alone, but because everyone knew: Half of them on deck should have been in the water, not the other. The storm had decided, and storm decisions cut deeper into the skin than any knife.

The one-eyed man stood amidships, his hands on his belt, and his gaze repeatedly wandered to Klaus. Not a word, not a grin, just that narrow, hard eye. He didn't need to say anything. Everyone knew what he was thinking:*The sea took eleven of us, and spared you. Why?*

And the men thought so too. Each in his own way. Some silently, some cursing, some with looks that lasted longer than necessary.

Bone Man stood at the helm, silent, but he saw everything. He was like a shadow, knowing that blood would soon drip again—not into the sea, but onto the deck.

The boy sat on a barrel, his hands bandaged, his eyes tired but bright. He saw the looks, the poison. He saw them whispering about Klaus, and he saw Klaus saying nothing. And that made him more nervous than any thunder.

Then the one-eyed man spoke. His voice was calm, but it cut like glass. "Eleven men are dead. Eleven. And our captain is still standing. Is that luck? Or is this a deal with the devil?"

Silence. Only the creaking of the wood. All eyes turned to Klaus.

Störtebeker grinned, thin and evil. "If I deal with the devil, it's only because he pays better than you dogs."

Some laughed nervously, others spat. The one-eyed man stepped closer. "We toil, we bleed, we die—and you stand there, laughing as if the sea belongs to you."

"Because that's the way it is," Klaus growled. "The sea belongs to no one. But if anyone is close to it, it's me. Because I'm still standing. Because I don't crawl, I don't cry, I don't pray. I piss into the storm's mouth, and it swallows it. You can't do that."

A murmur went through the ranks. Some nodded reluctantly, others hissed, still others stared at the ground.

But the one-eyed man laughed. A short, harsh laugh. "You're pissing in the storm's mouth, yes. But eventually it'll piss back. And then you'll be drinking with us."

Klaus took a step forward, his knife glinting in the sun. "Maybe. But until then, it's you I'll kill first. Don't forget that."

The deck was silent. Knives in their eyes, fear in their bones. But no one pulled. Not yet. The sea was too calm, and it was precisely this calm that held their hands back.

Bone Man looked back and forth between the two, his face impassive. But his fingers on the rudder twitched, as if he were holding back from striking himself.

The boy saw Klaus, saw the one-eyed man, and knew: the next storm wasn't coming from the sky. He was already standing on deck.

The sun came out late. Only when a streak of yellow broke through the gray clouds did color return to the sea. The water glittered as if nothing had happened—as if it hadn't just swallowed eleven men and nearly destroyed a ship. The sea was like a whore: pretending to be innocent while still tasting blood in its mouth.

The men blinked against the light. They were cold, they were shivering, they looked as if they'd vomited. One was holding his broken arm. Another was limping, his leg bruised. No one was without wounds. But no one was dead—not anymore.

Bone Man stood at the helm, motionless, his hands bloody, his eyes empty. He had brought the ship through, but he didn't pretend it was his doing. He knew it was only the sea that had spared them this time.

The boy was still sitting on his barrel. His face had hardened, older than it should have been. He had seen the storm, men drowning, blood and salt. And he hadn't screamed. That made him dangerous. Störtebeker knew it. The men knew it too.

The one-eyed man stepped into the sun, his eyes sparkling. He didn't grin, he didn't laugh. But he was alive, and that made him stronger. He had survived the storm, and with it his hatred. And hatred was harder than any dew.

"The sea has shown us who we are," he said, his voice harsh. "Eleven less. And the one who laughs is still standing."

The men looked at Klaus. Some with suspicion, some with fear, some with something one could almost call respect. But no one came closer. Not today.

Störtebeker stood in the middle of the deck, his hands on his belt, his face in the sunlight. He grinned, but it wasn't a laugh this time. It was the grin of a man who knows:*I won, but only this round.*

"The sea takes whoever it wants," he said calmly, almost quietly. "And today it didn't want me. So drink, eat, and shut up. Tomorrow it'll take the next one."

A few laughed, harshly and bitterly. Others spat. But no one objected. The silence spoke louder than any threat.

The sun rose higher, warming the wet deck, but not the men. The air was full of salt, full of sweat, full of hate. And somewhere in between, the next storm lurked—not of clouds, but of glances.

The boy looked at Klaus, and there was no fear in his eyes. Only this silent knowledge:*The next storm is coming. And this time you may be the victim.*

Klaus nodded almost imperceptibly. He knew it, too.

The "Colorful Cow" continued to move across the sea, a half-dead animal that nevertheless still floated. The men worked, tied, and mended. But every knot, every rope, was also a knot in their hatred.

The storm was over. But the war had only just begun.

Hanseblut tastes salty

The morning smelled of wet dew, old blood, and a promise no one wanted to speak: booty. The sea was as smooth as a well-told lie. The "Bunte Kuh" creaked forward, half mast, half sail, half life. But in the men's eyes, something glowed that was more than tiredness. Greed. Greed is a fire that burns even in the rain.

"Horizon," murmured Knochenmann, his hands steady on the rudder as if milking an old, stubborn cow. His chin twitched almost imperceptibly to starboard. Störtebeker followed his gaze. There it was: a billowing, tidy sail, the white shirt of a fine citizen's ship, too proud to show fear. A Hanseatic belly, bulging, self-absorbed, sated. The sight made him thirsty.

"Hanse," said Klaus, spitting over the railing. The saliva flew far, as if he'd practiced spitting in the world's face from a distance. "Today, the cow eats better than a mayor on a Sunday."

The news ran across the deck without anyone opening their mouths. Men raised their heads, their gazes sharpening. Wounds forgot to hurt, titanium fingers gripped ropes still sticky from salt and storm. The boy wiped the blood from the bandage on his trousers and stood without trembling. His gaze was steady. It was the sober gaze of someone who has understood that living too long only provides more reasons to lose it.

The one-eyed man stepped into the narrow shadow of the mainyard, one corner of his mouth raised. "Well, Captain," he said, not loudly, not quietly—so that the wrong people heard and the right people understood—"are you really dragging us down by the throats of the merchants with your wreck? Or are you just chasing after the last rum you don't want to pay for?"

Störtebeker grinned broadly and calmly. "I always chase after what's worthwhile. Today it's not you." He turned to the crew. "On deck! Everything that still pulls, pulls. Everything that still holds, holds. Anyone who pukes, pukes overboard. Anyone who prays, shut up until we're done."

The "Bunte Kuh" groaned as she set course, a wounded animal that nevertheless snaps at the throat of the strongest. Sails were set, as far as there were still any to be set. Rags fluttered, ropes creaked, nails groaned in the wood. Two men climbed into the rigging, slipped, cursed, and found purchase, because fear makes better fingers than hope.

Hanseatic's belly grew. Clean cloths, lines straight like the bookkeeping of a man who believes justice can be counted. Tiny figures stood on the bow—bourgeois hats in the wind, arms growing nervous the closer the crooked, toothy silhouette of the "Colorful Cow" came. One raised a telescope. One raised his hands. No one mustered courage.

"Cannons?" the boy asked curtly. "We are the cannons," Bone Man growled, and let the tiller do the talking, a subtle adjustment that steered the old ship as if the sea were getting an elbow in the ribs.

"Check the grappling hooks!" Störtebeker yelled. "Grease the ropes! Sharpen the knives! And whoever steals my first jump today won't just lose teeth!" Laughter, narrow, sharp, hungry. Metal scratched against leather. Someone smoothed seaweed over a hook, another tightened the handle. One kissed a rusty knife like a saint's image. Saints who still mattered here were made of steel.

"They're running!" shouted a man in the shroud. Sure enough, the Hanseatic ship straightened its course, seeking wind, seeking distance, seeking God knows who. But the wind didn't like taxpayers today. It lay lazily, allowing the "Bunte Kuh" just enough breath to keep it from breaking away – and taking just enough away from the other ship that its pride became ballast.

"They're too full," said Klaus. "Fat ships are slow. Like fat men with short legs." "Fat men have servants," snarled the one-eyed man. "And the servants shoot." "Then they learn to reload while they bleed," said Klaus without looking.

The distance melted. You could already smell it, that other ship: resin, fresh rope, tar, oil – and beneath it, the soft scent of bread, cloth, and spices. The smell made your tongue linger. Rum is soothing. The smell drives you crazy.

"Row in hard!" Bone Man's hands turned, the wood sang low. The bow of the "Bunte Kuh" cut in diagonally, not head-on, not clumsily. A dancer with a broken ankle who nevertheless forces his partner into a grip. "Hook!" Klaus's scream ripped through the air. Metal flew, scraped, and bit. Two hooks grabbed, a third slipped, a fourth anchored itself so greedily that the rope

screamed. The hulls kissed hard. Planks rubbed, a sound like a knife on bone. Men stumbled, watched the world shrink, until only two decks remained, hating each other.

On the Hanseatic ship, hasty orders. Too many "Get!", too few "Halt!" A handful of spears came to the railing, the tips trembling. A young man with a soft face and clean fingers tried to pretend he wasn't there by mistake. One of the older crew members—a Lübecker—crossed himself. Störtebeker saw it and laughed. "Wrong signal, friend. The only blessing here is that things are moving quickly."

He jumped. He always jumped first. A red flash of beard and rage. His hands on the railing, his leg over the edge, his knife free. The first spear stabbed too high, Klaus ducked, kicked, the spearman flew, the second one got the blade in the groin, made a face as if someone had just pulled his mother out of his stomach. Blood. Warm, honest, no accounting.

The*Colorful cow*released their rats. Bone Man not far behind Klaus, the club in his fingers a law without a book. One blow, a tin helmet became a bowl, a second, teeth became coins in the saliva. The boy landed hard, his knees creaked, but he stood. A Hanseatic Spess came in low, the boy dodged - not out of fear, but because his body had learned where the gaps were. His knife passed briefly, narrowly, cleanly over the Spess bearer's hand. Flesh, sinew, scream, drop. The boy plunged the blade into his throat. It was his first clean throat. He blinked. Not from tears. From the dust in his head that settled when you realized you were different from now on.

"Hanseblut!" someone yelled, laughing, gurgling. "Tastes salty!" "Everything tastes salty here, you idiot!" another gasped, and lunged. "I meant..." said the first, and was denied any more because someone cut a hole in his air.

The one-eyed man fought like a man who wanted to give hatred a home. He took steps that were too big, struck too deep, and still hit often enough, because greed makes the hand heavy. A merchant with a breastplate fell to the ground, believing as he fell that he had been a knight. The deck matter-of-factly explained to him that he was a package.

The noise was no longer noise, it was a storm. Screams, clanging, wood groaning, ropes singing, the gasping of emptying lungs. A man in good cloth tried to save a bag and only realized how ridiculous it was when the blade pierced his back. The bag fell. Out of it rolled things that smelled of home. Cinnamon. Dried apples. A whiff of baked goods. Two pirates saw it, sniffed like

dogs, laughed, and pocketed the stuff, because even in hell someone thinks about tomorrow.

Störtebeker was in his element—whatever that was: slaughtering, laughing, spitting. He moved as if the sea itself knew where it wanted him. A blow parried, a kick landed, a cut dealt. A man with a red plume shouted "Hanse!" as if it were a magic shield. Instead, Klaus gave him a second mouth on his neck. The plume fell, and the man looked surprised, like anyone who realizes too late that words are water.

"Aft hatch!" Bone Man yelled, and three of Störtebecker's men rushed to where the rich hide their supplies. Latches, hinges, splintered wood—among them: barrels. Beer, perhaps. Or salted herring. They smelled what they needed. They needed everything.

"Back off, you dogs!" The cry came from a Hanseatic officer who had learned how to shout without fighting. One of his men heard and took a half step back—enough space for Klaus to push him into the gap, knife in the liver, shoulder against chest, and his body did the rest.

The boy now stood next to Knochenmann. Blood on his fingers, breath short, eyes clear. A Hanseatic man with better steel approached him, a man who knew that fear is also a weapon. He made a beautiful fencing salute, parried air, and delivered a thrust that looked like a book. The boy didn't duck. He stepped forward, too close, so that the beautiful thrust found nowhere to go, and rammed his forehead into the fencer's nose. Crack. Surprise. Knochenmann's club ended the art.

"Good," Bone Man said, and the word carried more weight than any praise ever written. The boy nodded, and there was no pride in the nod. More like:*I can do that. Unfortunately.*

A final stand came from the Hanseatic side. Three men with halberds lined up in a line, so orderly it was almost stirring. They advanced, boots in step, teeth clenched. Störtebeker didn't jump. He waited. Then he shouted: "Left!" Two of his men went left, one slipped; "Right!" Bone Man was right. Klaus went straight ahead, under the blows, so low that the world briefly rose above. His knife found the middle man's belly; the left man got rope between his legs and fell; the right man saw the sun over Bone Man's shoulder one last time.

It was over. Not with drums and fanfare. But with a give in the planks, a sigh in the ropes. The few still standing dropped. Spears clanged. A man fell to his

knees and held up a chain, as if that would impress God. Here, only those with teeth were impressive.

"Secure the cargo!" growled Knochenmann. "Rum first," said one. "Beer will do," said another. "Anything will do," said Klaus. "And nothing will last long."

The one-eyed man approached, his gaze not on Klaus, but on the prey—and yet clinging to him like a limpet. "You've delivered, Captain," he murmured, and in the word lay a knife without a handle. "I deliver every day," said Klaus. "You only deliver your hatred. It keeps you warm, but not full." "Sometimes hatred fills you up," said the one-eyed man, smiling crookedly. "Only idiots get fat from it," said Klaus, stepping to the railing and looking into the mess that was turning red where the corpses were groping.

"Hanseblut," said the boy next to him, almost tonelessly. "Tastes really salty." "Everything tastes salty," Klaus repeated, "until the rope comes. It tastes like hemp."

The men were already in the ship's belly, tearing, hauling, laughing. Crates rattled, barrels rumbled, coins sang briefly and brightly before disappearing into sacks. Above, the sun reached through the ragged sail of the "Bunte Kuh" and made patterns on the blood and water, as if trying to build a church window out of dirt.

"We're not finished yet," said Störtebeker without turning around. "Today we eat. Tomorrow we look for teeth." "Whose teeth are we going to pull out?" asked the boy. "All of them," said Klaus. "And when there's no one left, we'll pull each other's teeth out until only jaws are chattering."

He didn't laugh. No one laughed. But the ship laughed—that deep, evil creak of a hull that knows it's alive again because others no longer do.

And over everything hung the smell of tar, bread, spice – and blood, the most honest spice the sea knows.

The Hanseatic ship stank of fear and wealth. Two things pirates always find, even when they're blind. The air was still thick with iron, blood, and smoke, but barrels and crates were already clattering across the deck, as if the men had forgotten the storm and the deaths. Forgotten? No. They drowned it, immediately, in the smell of their loot.

Störtebeker stood with his arms crossed, his face still red with the blood of a man he had just culled. He didn't grin. He just watched as his crew

dismembered the ship like dogs dismember a pig. Rum barrels rolled, bales of cloth were ripped open as if they were bodies. Spices trickled over the wood—pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg—a church of abundance that would be a bar from hell in a few hours.

"Carry it across!" Bone Man yelled, and his voice was a club that kept the men moving. They ran, stumbled, and dragged. The deck of the "Bunte Kuh" absorbed everything like a never-filling hole.

The boy stood in the middle. His hands were still sticky, his face pale, but his eyes were dark. He saw the crates, the coins, the barrels. He saw the men laughing as if they had never known the storm. One patted him on the shoulder, heavy and rough. "Today you're one of us, brat. Welcome to the belly of the beast."

The boy nodded silently. He felt his heart pounding, but no longer with fear. It was pride, disgusting and warm. He knew: This would never let him go.

The one-eyed man wasn't carrying anything. He walked slowly across the deck, his eyes fixed on Klaus, like someone turning the weight of the day over in his pocket. "A big catch, Captain," he said, and the "captain" was once again a dagger without a blade. "Perhaps the ship will survive a few more days before we can drink again."

"You can drink on a wreck," Klaus growled. "Ask the seagulls, they've been doing it for years."

The men laughed, nervously, greedily. The venom between the two was unmistakable. But the prey screamed louder than the hatred. Today, at least.

A man pushed open the door to the Hanseatic captain's cabin. Inside: a table, neatly set, a half-full carafe, two mugs. Bread, cheese, bacon. Things that had only appeared in stories on the "Bunte Kuh" for weeks. They tore it apart. Hands grabbed, mouths smacked, teeth gritted, as if they were trying to destroy the world by eating it.

"Slow down, you pigs!" Klaus yelled, but he was grinning now as he took a piece of cheese in his fist. "Otherwise, you'll die of gluttony before I see you at the rope."

Rum was opened, barrels were broken open, and the planks were soaked with alcohol and blood. Men drank, laughed, vomited, and drank again. One fell over and stayed there while the others stepped over him. Another pulled a

violin from a box and played a croaking note that was drowned out by screams and laughter.

The boy was given a cup of rum. He hesitated, smelled, drank—coughed, burned, laughed. For the first time, he laughed, not like a child, but like someone who had understood: rum is medicine for everything, even the thought of the gallows.

"See?" someone shouted. "Now you're really one of us!"

The one-eyed man stepped up to him and placed his hand on his shoulder, firm and heavy. "Watch out, little one," he murmured. "Rum makes men—but rum also makes corpses. And on this ship, there will be more corpses than men."

The boy looked at him, hard and defiant. "Then I'd rather stand with a cup than under the rope."

The one-eyed man gave a small grin. "That's how it always starts." Then he moved on, leaving the boy standing there, who now had two truths in his stomach: rum and fear.

The last survivors were rounded up on the Hanseatic ship. Merchants, sailors, a few poor devils who had sailed only for silver. They crouched on their knees, trembling, with their hands bound. One prayed, another cursed, a third wept.

“What do we do with them?” asked one of Störtebecker’s men.

Klaus stepped forward, scanning the rows as if inspecting cattle. "Most? Into the sea. Maybe it'll bring wind. Maybe just peace. Screw it. One stays to tell the tale. Otherwise, no one will believe us."

"Why one?" a man growled. "Because stories are more powerful than cannons," said Klaus. "If they're afraid of us, they sail slower. And slow ships are light ships."

He laughed, a rough, dark laugh. "So, who wants to be the lucky one?"

The Hanseatic men stared, screamed, whimpered. One begged. One offered money. One remained silent, his eyes full of hatred. Klaus pointed at him. "You. You're alive. So everyone knows that we could have killed you—and that we didn't. That's more heartbreaking than death."

The man spat in his face. Klaus didn't wipe it away. He just grinned. "Even better. Hate is a beautiful message."

The remaining prisoners were quietly thrown overboard. Screams, splashes, brief struggles in the water, then silence. The sea had eaten again.

The men cheered, drank, and shouted Störtebeker's name. Not because they loved him. But because he had given them loot and rum. Today, that was enough.

The sun was low, the blood glistened, the rum barrel was almost empty. The "Bunte Kuh" lay heavy in the water, laden but alive. And in the air hung the taste of salt, iron, and the sweet certainty that the Hanseatic League hated them today—and that was the only love pirates needed.

The night came without stars. A black blanket, heavy and wet, that only let through the smell of blood and rum.*Colorful Cow*No light burned except for the torches, which turned the deck into a blazing maw. Men danced, stumbled, shouted, laughed. One was still playing the violin he had found, the strings off, the notes off-key, but it was music enough to drown out the screams of the drowned, which still echoed in some minds.

Rum flowed like water. They had opened barrels, drinking with their hands, with their helmets, with their bare mouths. The deck was sticky, their beards dripped, their voices were rough like rusty anchor chains. Every sip was a victory, every belch a hymn.

The boy sat between them, the cup large in his small hand, his lips burned by the rum. But he laughed, rosy-cheeked, with eyes that still saw more than they should. A man put his arm around his shoulder, pressed him against him. "Today you're one of us, little one. Maybe tomorrow too. If you survive."

“I’ll survive,” growled the boy, drinking as if he’d already died twice.

Klaus sat at the bow, a cup clutched in his fist, his face carved from wood in the torchlight. He wasn't laughing. He was drinking, yes, but he wasn't laughing. The men were celebrating as if they had conquered the world, and Klaus knew: they had only taken one ship. The world was still big, the Hanseatic League even bigger.

The one-eyed man stood in the middle of the deck, the rum glinting on his chin, his eye sparkling. He spoke loudly, too loudly, so that everyone had to hear. "We did it. Not because our captain led us – but because we did it ourselves!"

Cheers, roars, fountains of rum. "He jumps, yes, he laughs, yes – but we strike, we die, we eat. Without us, he'd just be a big-mouthed sailor!"

Some nodded, roared, others spat. But it worked. His words sank into thirsty throats like poison.

Störtebeker slowly rose. His eyes were clouded by the rum, but his voice was sharp as a new blade. "Without you, I would be nothing? True. But without me, you would have been dead long ago. You need my hatred, my teeth, my fists. Otherwise, you would just be fishermen with poor nets."

Laughter, wild, off-key, loud. One person shouted, "He's right!" Another, "Screw it, as long as the rum doesn't run out!"

Klaus took a few steps toward the one-eyed man; the planks creaked, the fire painted grimaces on their faces. "You want to be captain? Then be captain when the rope comes. Then be captain when the storm breaks your bones. Today I was, tomorrow I'll be—and as long as I'm still breathing, no one will tear the crown from my head."

The one-eyed man grinned broadly, raised his cup, his eye glittering. "You're still breathing. But for how long?" He raised the cup, rum splashed, the men cheered. For them, it was just a drinking game, a war of words. But they didn't know that knives were being sharpened here—not with steel, but with looks.

The party continued, louder, wilder. Men hit each other, kissed, vomited, sang. One fell off the railing, another didn't pull him up. "He's swimming," he said, laughing. No one cared.

The boy sat there, half drunk, half awake, and looked at the two men who were more than pirates: Störtebeker, the king without a crown, and the one-eyed man, the shadow who wanted to steal it from him. The boy knew: sooner or later, the deck would be red—not with Hanseatic blood, but with theirs.

The night dragged on, the rum ran out, the laughter grew hoarse. One man slept in his own vomit, another with a knife in his hand, as if still fighting in his dreams. The fire crackled, the planks sighed, and over everything hung a faint, persistent suspicion: This was not a victory. This was just a break.

At one point, Störtebeker stood alone at the railing, his cup empty, his eyes red. He looked into the water, black and motionless, and whispered: "Salty blood. Salty sea. Salty end." Then he threw the cup overboard. He heard the quiet splash, and it sounded like a promise.

Morning crept across the deck like an old dog with a broken back. No sun, only a pale light that fell on faces like a mockery. Bodies lay everywhere—not dead, but so close that it made no difference. The stench of vomit, rum, and blood hung in the air, thick as a curse.

One man woke up with his head in the barrel, and it took him a full minute to realize he was still alive. Another lay with a knife in his hand, his fingers clenched as if he had spent the night fighting invisible enemies. Two were sleeping on top of each other, and when one moved, the other bit him in the ear.

The "Bunte Kuh" drifted slowly, fully laden, its planks groaning. The Hanseatic ship was empty except for the one man they had allowed to live. He was still kneeling on deck, his hands bound, his eyes wide, dry, empty. He had seen the night, the laughter, the drinking, the murders, the games. He had seen what true hell was—and he knew he would tell it.

Bone Man was the first to get back up. He threw cold water in the men's faces, punched, kicked, and yelled. "Stand up, you idiots! We're counting!" He didn't mean the heads. He meant the loot.

Chests were opened, barrels ripped open, crates lifted. Gold, cloth, spices. More than the ship could carry. The men fought over it, each wanting first. They argued, shouted, and fought. One drew a knife, another slashed his arm.

"Shut up!" Störtebeker yelled from the railing. His voice was rough, but it cut through the chaos like a hatchet. "Everything belongs to everyone—as long as I say how much belongs to whom."

"And if you cheat us?" one of them shouted, still drunk but loudly. Klaus approached him, slowly, the deck creaking beneath his steps. He didn't look him in the eye, he simply punched him. A punch so deep that the man flew backward, over a crate, and lay there. "Then ask me tomorrow. Today, it's enough that you're still breathing."

Some laughed, others remained silent. But they obeyed. The loot was counted, stacked, and secured. Störtebeker didn't distribute—he pushed, arranged, and assigned. He did it like someone who knew that men don't need equality, but fear.

The one-eyed man watched. He wasn't carrying a crate himself, he wasn't holding a rope. He only watched as Klaus organized the men, as they

reluctantly followed him. His eyes flashed, narrow, poisonous. He said nothing. Not yet.

The boy helped as best he could. He carried small things—bags, weapons, bread. The men saw him and nodded. He was one of them now, everyone knew that. But they also knew: young men die quickly. And many of them wanted to see how long he would last.

As the sun rose higher, the loot stood in piles, the men panted, the rum was almost gone. Störtebeker sat down on a crate, drew his knife, and plunged it into the wood. "This is our day. We live, they don't. And as long as we live, we take. The sea will take us, of course. But not today."

The men roared, laughed, and cheered. Not out of joy. Out of fear, which had to turn into noise or it would suffocate.

And over everything hung the one-eyed man's gaze, cold and sharp. He didn't grin, he didn't scream. But he thought. And that was more dangerous than any knife.

He was still kneeling there. The one survivor. His face, tanned by the wind, was now pale, sunken, his lips chapped. The smell of pirate rum hung around him like a cloud, but he himself was dry as dust. No one had given him water, no one bread. They wanted to see how long he would remain silent.

In the morning, when the men stood up, stumbling, arguing, he was still on his knees, his hands bound, his back stiff. His gaze was directed straight ahead, not at them, not into the sea—somewhere where there was no hell.

"Well, he's still alive," one sneered, kicking him in the back. The man fell forward, then got back up. "Tough bastard," another laughed. "He can take more than half of this."

Störtebeker approached, a piece of cheese in his hand, bit into it, chewed slowly, and dropped the crumbs. He looked at the prisoner, who was staring at him without lowering his eyes. "What's your name?" Klaus asked.

The man remained silent.

A blow from behind, a pirate's fist, split his lip. Blood flowed, but he remained silent. "Answer, or I'll throw you overboard," growled the pirate.

Klaus raised his hand. "Let him. He knows he has to talk when I want him to."

He squatted down, his knees creaking, his eyes close to the prisoner. "You will live. Do you understand? You will tell the story. Of today. Of me. Of the*Colorful Cow*. Of the blood that tastes saltier than your fucking beer. And everyone in Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen should tremble when they hear my name."

The man spat blood in his face. Again. For the second time. Störtebeker didn't wipe it away. He grinned. "That's good. Hate is better than fear. Hate spreads faster. Hate eats hearts from the inside until nothing remains. So go ahead and tell us what you saw. Tell us how we laugh while you die."

The crew cheered, laughed, and roared. One shouted, "Let him sing!" Another, "Let him dance before he leaves!" They grabbed the man, dragged him up, kicked him, shoved him, and forced him to sway between them like a puppet.

"Sing!" they shouted. One hit him on the head with a cup. "Sing yourselves, you pigs," the man growled hoarsely.

A murmur went through the crew. Respect? Mockery? Hard to say.

The one-eyed man stepped closer, his gaze sharp. "He has more backbone than half of these." Then he looked at Klaus. "Why did you let him live? Someone like that? He won't spread fear. He'll sow vengeance."

Klaus stood up, stretched, and laughed briefly. "That's exactly what I want. Revenge is slower than fear. It takes longer. It grows. And while it grows, we have time to feed."

The one-eyed man shook his head and muttered, but not quietly enough: "Or she'll cut off your head someday, Captain."

Störtebeker grinned. "Then let them try. But until then, we'll live. And we'll live better than any merchant."

The crew roared, stamped, and pushed the prisoner around until he collapsed. They laughed, but behind their laughter was something else. They saw that Klaus wasn't afraid—not of the man, not of the Hanse, not of the rope. And that was precisely what frightened them.

The boy stood next to the barrel, saw the prisoner lying on the ground, blood in his mouth, but his gaze still unbroken. He looked at Klaus, who was laughing. And in that moment, the boy knew: Stories are more dangerous than swords. Swords kill men. Stories kill worlds.

The booty stood on deck like an altar. Chests, barrels, sacks—a pile of gold and salt so large it was almost laughable. But no altar stands for long without a sacrifice.

The men squatted around, red-eyed, with heavy heads. The rum was almost gone, the beer bitter. One chewed on a cinnamon bark as if it were meat. Another licked a coin, laughing like a madman. "Tastes like freedom!" he gasped, until someone slapped the coin out of his mouth.

"How do we divide it?" one asked, too loudly, too early. "Like always!" another shouted. "Equal parts for everyone." "Equal parts?" laughed a third, who had carried more. "I held half the mast while you puked! I get more!"

Screams. Curses. Hands grasped handles. Knives flashed in eyes, even though they were still in their sheaths.

Störtebeker stepped forward, slowly, the knife loosely in his fist. "Stop howling, you dogs. None of you did more than the other. Everyone ate, everyone bled, everyone drank. And whoever thinks they're worth more—let them prove it."

Silence. A silence heavy as lead. No one dared to draw the knife. Not yet.

The one-eyed man stepped out of the shadows, his gaze as sharp as a fishhook. "He thinks proving means going up against him. And everyone knows how that ends. With blood. But maybe it's time, Captain. Maybe someone here wants to see if your knife really is faster than your mouth."

The crew murmured, heads turned. The air was heavy, the ropes stretched like throats.

"Keep talking," Klaus said quietly, his grin narrow but dangerous. "One more word, and you'll be the first to prove it."

The one-eyed man laughed, a short, dry laugh. "Not today. Today we're drinking. But tomorrow, maybe..."

"Tomorrow you'll be pissing in bed again," Klaus growled and turned away. But his neck was tense, hard as a rope.

The men roared, laughed uncertainly, and pulled each other's hair. But everyone knew: Something had started. Not today, perhaps not tomorrow—but soon.

The boy stood next to the loot, his gaze wandering between Klaus and the one-eyed man. He understood that the treasure wasn't just gold. The treasure was power. And that was lying on deck right now, undivided, a raw piece of meat between two dogs.

"Let's share it before we slit each other's throats," Bone Man murmured, his voice so deep it was barely audible. But everyone heard. He stood there, tall, tough, the club in his hand as if it were the law. "Equal for all. Until the next storm comes. Then we'll count again."

Silence. Then a nod, grumbling, forced. The men obeyed. Not Klaus this time, not the one-eyed man. But the Bone Man, whose silence carried more weight than ten speeches.

The crates were opened, and shares were distributed. Coins were placed in sacks, spices in cloths, strips of cloth were cut up, and leftover rum was poured out. Everyone got something, each less than they wanted, but enough to avoid killing.

Störtebeker watched, grinning back. "That's right. Equal rights for everyone. Until someone's too stupid to uphold it."

The one-eyed man nodded, but his eye burned. He knew what everyone knew: Today it was the Bone Man who had prevented the mutiny. And that only made the question more pressing: Who was really the captain here?

Night returned like a rat: silent, smelly, with teeth no one saw until it was too late. A few torches hung dimly above the deck, their light trembling like the hands of the men still drinking. The storm was distant, the sea calm—too calm, as if it wanted to hear what was about to happen.

The crew crouched in small groups, their loot in sacks beside them, each clutching their share like a lover. They drank, they murmured, they argued quietly. Everyone knew: if someone gets too greedy, knives are quicker than words.

Störtebeker sat at the stern, legs spread, cup in his fist. His gaze wandered over the deck like that of a cat counting mice. He didn't laugh. He didn't drink much. He waited. For what, no one knew. Perhaps not even he.

The one-eyed man stood in the torchlight, his shoulder leaning against the mast, his gaze fixed on Klaus, like a hunter on an animal he's not yet allowed to shoot. His eye gleamed, and every time he raised the cup, he looked over the

rim at Klaus—as if trying to memorize the moment when he would draw his knife.

The boy sat with two older men, his cup half empty, his cheeks red but his eyes clear. He heard them whispering. "The one-eyed man is right," one murmured. "Klaus is leading us to ruin. The rope is already laughing at us." "Perhaps," said the other. "But who, if not him? The one-eyed man? He'll eat us first before he leads us." "Better eaten than hanged."

The boy swallowed. He understood what was going on. It was no longer a celebration. It was a state of siege—except that the besiegers and the besieged were the same men.

Suddenly, the one-eyed man stood up, stepped into the light, and raised his cup. "To us!" he roared. "To the men who fight, who die, who bleed—not to the one who always laughs while we vomit!"

The crew roared, some laughed, others looked at Klaus.

Klaus slowly stood up, knife in hand, loose but visible. "To us, yes," he shouted. "To those who fight. And to the one who jumps first when things get serious. And that's me, you dogs! Who was the first on the Hanse's deck? Who opened the first throat? Me! Not him! Not the one with the eye that drools more than it sees!"

Laughter, screams, cheers. But the laughter was sharp, the cheering poisonous. Knives slipped into fists, not yet drawn, but ready.

The one-eyed man grinned broadly. "Jumping is easy if you don't have a brain. A dog jumps too. But a dog will never be king."

Silence. Only the creaking of the planks, the flickering of the torches.

Klaus stepped forward until they were almost touching. Two men, two shadows, two crowns of hate. "King?" he growled. "Screw kings. Here, there's only one who's alive. And that's me. For now."

The men held their breath. The boy felt the deck vibrate, as if the nails were trying to come off to see blood.

But Bone Man stepped in. Not a word. Just his figure, tall, immobile, club in hand. He stood directly between the two, looked at neither, said nothing. But it was enough.

The tension didn't break - it retreated, like a knife sliding back into its sheath, only to be able to stab better later.

Klaus stepped back, the grin back on his face, but his eyes hard. "Not today. Today we're drinking. Tomorrow, maybe not." The one-eyed man laughed, hoarse and crooked. "Tomorrow will come sooner than you think."

The crew breathed a sigh of relief, forced laughter, drank, and talked. But they all knew: This was only postponed. Not a storm of clouds, but a storm of blood.

The boy looked at Bone Man, who stood there silently, motionless. For a moment, he thought the man was carved from wood. But then he blinked—slowly, heavily—and the boy understood: Bone Man was the only thing holding this hell together.

And he also knew: wood breaks at some point.

The morning arrived rough. The sea was choppy, the sky leaden gray, seagulls screeched like children whose bones were being stolen. The "Bunte Kuh" creaked heavily, laden to the planks. The deck stank of rum, sweat, and greed.

Klaus stood at the helm, the wind tugging at his beard. His eyes were red, but wide awake. He knew he had to deliver today—not loot, not rum, but something to keep the men with him. The night had left cracks, and if he didn't fill them, they would break.

"Sail!" shouted someone in the rigging. Heads shot up, eyes narrowed. On the horizon, a dark dot, fast, clean, with white sails sticking out like teeth in the wind. A ship. Hanse. Again.

The men shouted, laughed, and cursed. "One more!" - "Too full to sail, just like yesterday!" - "Or too fast for us, Captain!"

The one-eyed man grinned broadly and stepped onto the deck, his voice loud. "Well, Klaus? Jump again? Or is that enough for you today?" Some laughed, others remained silent. Everyone looked at Klaus.

Klaus spat over the railing and wiped his mouth. "The sea gives, the sea takes. Today it gives. So we'll take it." "Maybe this time it'll take us," someone murmured.

Bone Man stepped forward, his voice deep. "If we get them, we'll get more than we can handle. If we don't get them, we're dead. So screw it. We're going."

A murmur, half agreement, half fear.

Klaus laughed harshly. "You hear it. Even the Bone Man wants it. And anyone who contradicts him can just jump overboard, saves me the trouble."

Orders flew. Ropes were pulled, sails were set, men screamed, sweated, and stumbled. The "Bunte Kuh" stretched, creaking like an old dog that still wants to bite.

The Hanseatic ship grew on the horizon. It was faster, clear. Fresh, clean, proud. But the "Bunte Kuh" (Big Cow) came closer, because hate moves faster than wind.

The crew roared, the boy climbed into the rigging, his heart in his throat, his hands on the rope. He saw the Hanseatic ship, large, powerful, packed with cannons. He swallowed. "Too big," he thought. "Too big for us."

But Klaus stood at the front, broad, unwavering. "No ship is too big," he growled. "Only men are too small. And I'm not a small man."

The one-eyed man stepped next to him, quietly, close to his ear. "If we screw this up, we'll all hang. And then your name will hang, too." Klaus grinned, not turning his head. "Names don't hang. Only necks."

The "Bunte Kuh" raced, the sea lashed, the wood sang. Men roared, grappling hooks clanged, knives were drawn. The Hanseatic ship came closer, larger, more threatening—a belly full of silver and steel.

The boy felt the trembling beneath his feet; the entire ship shook as if it were a heart about to burst. He looked at Klaus, who was laughing, his teeth bared, his eyes wild.

"Today, you dogs!" Klaus shouted. "Today we drink Hanseatic blood, and tomorrow... tomorrow perhaps our own. But today we live!"

The men roared, stamped, and tore at the ropes. Their fear turned to rage, their fury to strength. The "Colorful Cow" leaped forward, a toothy wreck that rammed itself into the belly of the rich woman.

The Hanseatic ship turned, cannons flashed. Thunder rolled across the sea. Bullets flew, wood splintered, men screamed. But the "Bunte Kuh" held its course, unstoppable, hungry.

Störtebeker stood at the front, his arms wide open, as if he were about to eat the bullets. "Come!" he roared. "Come and see how one dies while living!"

The men laughed, cried, screamed. The boy clung on, his heart nearly exploding. He realized: This wasn't a ship. This was a beast. And Klaus was its heart, rotten though it was.

The hulls crashed together, the sea spewed foam and blood. The men jumped, hooks flew, knives flashed. The battle began again.

And in this chaos, everyone knew: Today would decide who was really the captain.

The gallows is already laughing quietly

The sea was still red from the last battle when the men realized that something heavier than rum and blood hung in the air. It was the laughter of a rope, quiet, far away, but already on their necks.

The "Bunte Kuh" pushed its way through the gray sea with creaking planks, overloaded with loot, overloaded with hate. The men were full of rum, but not of greed. And somewhere beyond the horizon, everyone knew: The Hanseatic League has eyes. Always. And the Hanseatic League does not forgive.

Klaus stood at the front, his beard crusted with salt, his knife still dirty. He felt it—like a hand on his throat, invisible, cold. But he grinned anyway, because he knew: If he showed it, he'd be dead. "We're alive," he growled, more to himself than to the others. "We're alive because we don't stand still. Standing still is death."

But things began to ferment among the crew. The one-eyed man was loud, talking about Hamburg, the ports, and the heads that were already clamoring for them. "They're building ropes," he shouted, "thick, new ropes, just for us. And the first one to dangle from them is the one who always laughs!" His finger pointed at Klaus, like a cannon loaded with poison.

A few men nodded and murmured. Others spat and growled. No one wanted to say it out loud, but they knew: The Hanseatic League was not blind. And the Hanseatic League was patient.

The boy listened, silently, with wide eyes. He saw the one-eyed man spitting out the words, how they struck sparks that glowed like fire on the deck. He saw Klaus baring his teeth, but not wanting to laugh. And he knew: This wasn't just a game anymore. This was a spiral. And it led to only one place—the gallows.

Bone Man said nothing. He stood, as always, silent, his hands on the club, his eyes empty. But his silence was a gravestone. He knew it before the others suspected it: the rope had been tied long ago.

In the evening, fog came. Thick, heavy, like a sack over their heads. The men fell silent, the torches flickered. From the gray, a bell chimed, far away, eerie. "A city," murmured one. "Hamburg, maybe." - "Or Lübeck," whispered another. "It doesn't matter. There are ropes hanging everywhere."

Klaus laughed, hard, rough, without joy. "Let them hang. We'll sail until they're fed up. And if necessary, I'll shit in their faces from the rope."

Some laughed, others didn't. They could already hear the wood cracking, the rope rubbing. Each in his own throat.

The boy lay down in the hammock, his eyes open. He heard the creaking of the mast, the whispering of the wind, and somewhere in between, he thought he heard a giggle. No person, no man, no sea. A rope that was already laughing.

And he knew: soon someone would dance.

The fog lifted the next morning, and land lay beyond. Towers, roofs, chimneys. A harbor large enough to swallow them, small enough that they could be seen long before they docked.

"Hamburg?" one asked, his voice rough. "I don't care," grumbled another. "They're all cities that love rope."

The men stared. Some with hunger, others with fear. The rum was almost gone, the loot heavy, their stomachs emptier than they should have been. They needed land, they needed women, they needed fresh beer. But they also knew: every step onto the harbor pavement could be their last.

"We're not docking," Klaus growled, his eyes narrowed. "Too many eyes. Too many ropes." "And not enough rum!" someone yelled. "The barrels are empty!" "Then drink your piss," Klaus snarled back.

Laughter, but nervous. The sea wasn't a threat. The men were.

The one-eyed man stepped forward, his gaze fixed greedily on the rooftops. "We need land. We need supplies. Otherwise we'll perish before the next storm hits. What's your plan, Captain? Drift around forever until the seagulls peck us out of our eyes?"

Klaus spat into the sea, his hands on the rope. "My plan is not to end up like a fish in a net. You want Hamburg? Lübeck? Then go hang yourselves. But I'll put the*Colorful cow*not into the jaws of the gallows."

Murmuring voices, excited, angry. One whispered, "He's scared." "Maybe we really should dock..." "Maybe we need a different captain..."

The words crawled across the deck like rats. The boy heard them all. He felt the air grow heavy, the way knives were already sticking to handles.

Then Bone Man stepped out of the shadows. No words at first, just his gaze. One by one, they fell silent. He raised his club and pointed toward land. "Whoever wants to go, goes. But then alone. The Hanseatic League loves small fish."

No one moved. Not one.

Klaus grinned crookedly. "Listen to the man. You want to dance? Then dance alone. I'll stay with the sea as long as it carries me."

The men growled, spat, and laughed in a forced way. But the unrest remained. Land was a temptation, a rope a threat. Everyone knew they couldn't stay at sea forever. But everyone also knew: docking meant smelling the gallows.

In the evening, they anchored, far out, the land shrouded in haze, close enough to hear the bells. Each beat a heartbeat, a blow to their nerves.

The boy sat on the railing, watched the city lights flicker, and thought: We're already dead, we just don't know it yet.

They did go ashore. Not all of them, not openly, but enough to show that even pirates can't live on salt alone. A rowboat full of men, stinking of sweat and rum, their eyes greedily fixed on the city lights.

The alleys were damp, the pavement greasy, the stench of fish, beer, and old piss wafted into their nostrils. Everywhere, something was screaming: merchants, whores, dogs. But louder than all of them was the bell ringing in the distance. Each strike was a cold finger tightening the noose around their necks.

"Taverns!" one yelled. "Beer, women, dice!" "And knives," muttered the boy, feeling the city's ground for the first time and realizing he was swaying, even without the waves.

The first tavern devoured them like hungry wolves. Doors opened, benches creaked, beer flowed, whores screamed. The men laughed, tossed coins, clinked cups. Everything was loud, too loud. But behind the noise, something lurked. A glance, a shadow, a whisper.

The innkeepers knew them. Of course they knew them. Everyone in the harbor knew that if men smelled like that, screamed like that, and threw like that, then they were pirates. And everyone in the harbor knew that the Hanseatic League waited for such men like a butcher waits for pigs.

"Look around," Bone Man growled, his back against the wall, his eyes still. "Too many eyes. Too many ears." "Screw eyes!" one yelled, pulling a whore onto his lap. "As long as their legs are spread, their mouths can scream for all I care!"

Störtebeker sat in the middle of it all, drinking, laughing, clinking coins. But his gaze wandered. Every door, every face, every hand on his belt. He knew this wasn't a party. This was a dance on rotten planks.

The one-eyed man grinned, raised his cup, and spoke loudly. "Here! This is what freedom looks like! We take, we drink, we live! And if they want to hang us—let them try!" Cheers, laughter, beer sloshed. But the eye sparkled at Klaus, sharp, lurking.

The boy sat in the corner, cup in hand, and felt how cold the room was despite the fire. He heard a conversation at the next table, two traders, quietly: "Those are them... the ones from the*Colorful Cow*…“ – “The Hanseatic League will find out. Tonight…”

He swallowed and looked at Klaus. He was still laughing, tossing a coin at a whore, but his fingers were drumming on the cup. He had heard it. Of course.

Suddenly he stood up, so fast that the bench tipped over. "We're leaving," he growled. "Not yet!" protested one, already too drunk to stand.
"Now!" Klaus thundered, his voice so sharp that the whores backed away. "Or you'll be decorations on a gallows tree tomorrow!"

Silence. Only heavy, stinking breaths. Then they rumbled out, one after the other, their laughter stifled, their steps hurried. Behind them remained the tavern—and the looks that were worth more than gold. Looks that wove ropes.

Outside in the alley, it was colder, darker. Klaus looked at them, one by one. "We're not kings here. We're vultures. And vultures fly before the dogs come. So shut up and run."

They ran back to the boat, the pavement echoing, the shadows lengthening. And somewhere, high above, the boy heard that giggle again. Soft, sharp. A rope that was happy.

The alleys were narrow, damp, and stank of garbage and fear. The laughter of the taverns was still behind them, but ahead of them lay only darkness. They ran, stumbled, and cursed. One vomited while running, another lost a boot and left it lying there.

"Faster!" Klaus hissed, his beard gleaming in the moonlight. "The ropes are moving faster than you think!"

And he was right. Behind them, they could already hear footsteps, many of them, hard, disciplined. No staggering, no slurring. This wasn't a mob of drunks—these were men in rows, men with weapons.

"Hanse!" one gasped. "The dogs smelled us!"

The crew plunged forward, the boat on their minds, the boat like the last drop of rum in the barrel. The boy ran beside Bone Man, his legs burning, his lungs screaming, but he held on. He heard whistles, orders, clanging iron—and he knew: If they stumbled today, they'd dangle tomorrow.

The one-eyed man laughed as he ran, wild, crooked, like someone who loved death. "Come on!" he roared into the darkness. "Come and get us if you can!" His voice echoed, mocking, venomous. But the boy also heard: He wasn't slowing down. He, too, didn't want to end up on the gallows.

They reached the quay; the boat lay there, black, small, and rotten. They jumped in, pushed off, rowed, and cursed. Arrows whizzed across the water,

one hitting the hull, another hitting a man in the shoulder. He screamed, bit his tongue, but rowed anyway.

"Row!" Klaus yelled as the first lights flared up on the quay and the first silhouettes of crossbows became visible. "Row, or the dogs will eat us!"

The oars dipped into the water, the boat shot forward. The arrows whirred, the water splashed, screams, curses. The boy pulled the injured man by the collar, holding him above water as he almost fell. He felt blood on his hands, warm, sticky, real.

Behind them, voices echoed, shrill, angry, disciplined. "Pirates! Get them!" – "Ropes for everyone!" – "Don't let any escape!"

But the boat moved on, out into the darkness, toward the "Colorful Cow," waiting like a black shadow. Men on board had heard the noise, ropes flew, hands reached out to help.

They climbed up, wet, panting, bleeding. The boat was cut loose and drifted back, empty, useless. Arrows still splashed into the sea, but too late. They were still on board. Still.

Klaus stood on the deck, breathing heavily, laughing hard. "See? The rope laughed—but it hasn't bitten yet. Not yet!"

The crew roared, half in triumph, half in fear. They had escaped, yes. But they all knew: The Hanse had seen their faces, heard their voices, collected their names in the shadows. The rope had been tied. Now all that was missing was the day when it would actually be tightened.

The boy stood at the railing, his heart still racing, his hands full of blood. He stared back at the quay, where the lights danced, where the arrows still flew. And he thought: We haven't won. We've only bought time. And time is a damned expensive commodity.

The "Bunte Kuh" was back out at sea, the harbor at her back, the wind strong, the water black. But instead of cheers or laughter, there was only a dull rumble on deck. No one was talking about triumph. Everyone was thinking of the quay, the lights, the arrows. Everyone could still hear the voices shouting: "Ropes for everyone!"

The men drank, but it was no use. The rum no longer burned; it tasted bitter, as if laced with fear. One pulled the coins from his pouch, staring at them as if

they could tell him how many days he had left. Another sharpened his knife, too long, too thoroughly, as if he wanted to saw through the rope with it.

"They know who we are," muttered one. "They've seen our faces." "Screw faces," growled another. "What matters is who hits faster." "What matters is who hangs first," laughed a third, and the laughter was so hollow it sounded like a howl.

Klaus stood in the middle of the deck, his hands on his belt, his grin broad but not warm. "You talk about the rope as if it were already there. Screw the rope. We're still sailing. We're still alive. We're still drinking."

"Yet!" cried the one-eyed man, his voice sharp, loud, for all to hear. "But how long? Hmm? How long, Captain? Until Hamburg casts its nets? Until Lübeck greets us with cannons? Until Bremen counts our heads? You can laugh, Klaus—but your laughter won't make the ropes any thinner!"

Unrest, voices, screams. Some nodded, others remained silent. Knives flashed, hands twitched.

Then Bone Man stepped forward, like a shadow, tall and motionless. He struck the deck with his club, making the planks shake. "Enough," he said. Just one word, but deep as thunder. Silence followed.

Klaus looked at the one-eyed man, long and hard. Then he grinned again, showing his teeth. "You're talking about ropes, One-Eye? Ropes are for merchants. For cowards. For men who would rather be hanged than die free. We don't die on the gallows. We die with a cup of rum in our hands, with blood in our mouths, with knives in our fists. That's how men die. And if any of you think the rope is easier – jump. There's the sea. There's freedom."

Silence. Only the creaking of the mast, the whistling of the wind. No one jumped. No one spoke.

The boy stood next to the railing, feeling the air burn. He understood: Klaus was still holding them together, not with hope, not with courage, but with pure defiance. But defiance wasn't a rope that lasts forever. Defiance would break, sooner or later. And when it broke, everything fell.

Night crept over the sea, black, endless. And somewhere in between, that giggling could be heard again. Not loud, not close, but there. The gallows laughed. Quietly, patiently.

Bedbugs and ballads

Below deck, it was like the belly of a rotting animal. Damp, stuffy, and dark. Every breath tasted of sweat, old wood, and the urinal in the corner that no one voluntarily emptied. Rats were everywhere, and they had more rights than the men. They ate the little bread, they gnawed at the rope, and sometimes, if someone slept too soundly, they even ate at the ear.

The hammocks swung, squeaked, and creaked. Men tossed and turned, cursed, and scratched. Bedbugs crawled across skin, crawling into beards, shirts, and dreams. Everyone knew: you were never alone down here. Bedbugs, lice, rats—all part of the crew.

The boy lay in his hammock, his shirt sticky on his back, his skin raw. He heard the smacking of the rats, the scratching, the giggling of the men as one cursed because another bedbug walked across his stomach. He thought: This is worse than any storm. Storms end. This never ends.

Then someone started singing. Croaking, dirty, a song as crooked as his teeth. "Rum in the stomach, blood in the mouth, and the rope will make us healthy!" Laughter, voices joined in, cups tapped against wood. Soon they were all singing, off-key, loud, spiteful. The bugs crawled on, but the voices made them smaller.

One started a new song, cruder, with more venom: "Klaus, the king, sits on the barrel, shits into the sea and eats the hate!" Roaring laughter, feet stamped, hands beat against planks.

The boy heard it, laughed uncertainly along, and looked at Klaus, who was down below with them. The captain was lying in his hammock, his arm behind his head, grinning broadly. He was really laughing. "Go on, you dogs! Sing! Deafen the bugs, blind the rats! Sing until your mouths are full of shit!"

The men roared louder, clinking their cups together. More verses, dirtier, harder. About the one-eyed man, about whores, about the Bone Man. When one dared to sing a line about the Bone Man, half the choir fell silent. The Cudgel Man didn't move. But his gaze wandered—and the singer fell silent, his throat dry as sand.

Laughter, nervous, loud, too loud.

The boy understood: The ballads were knives made of words. Whoever wielded them cut—whoever received them bled, whether they wanted to or not.

And Klaus? He laughed, but his eyes were alert. He knew these songs weren't games. They were mirrors. And mirrors always show cracks.

The voices were harsh at first, then wilder. The emptier the cups, the more venomous the verses. It was as if the rum had sharpened their tongues, not blunted them.

"Klaus the Great, with an empty barrel, just eats words, no fun!" roared one. Another added: "Captain? He's a clown – jump first and drink us down!"

Laughter, muffled and biting. Wood vibrated underfoot, cups clinked.

Klaus was still grinning, broadly, his eyes half-closed. But the grin was harder, no longer free. The boy saw it: It wasn't a grin that meant to laugh, but rather to say: I'll break your teeth if you go too far.

Then the one-eyed man chimed in. Loud, full voice, one eye flashing in the torchlight: "One-eyed sees more than blind—a true leader, not a child!"

A murmur. Some laughed, others paused. Everyone realized what it was: no longer a song, but a knife thrust straight into the captain's heart.

The boy sucked in his breath and looked at Klaus. But Klaus was really laughing. Hard, deep, a laugh like a punch in the face. "Keep singing, One-Eye! Sing until your throat bursts! But don't forget – singing is easy. Dying is hard."

Silence, for a moment. Then the men roared again, louder, drunker, more greedily. They felt the tension, they licked it off their skin like salt.

The boy understood: This was war, only different. No steel, no blood, just words. But words could pierce, could create cracks. And the cracks ran through the ship like water through wood.

Bone Man sat in his corner, his face in shadow, his club beside him. He didn't sing, he didn't laugh. He was the silence itself, oppressing everyone.

And suddenly the boy knew: If these ballads continued, soon there would be no more songs sung, but screams.

The voices were now more shouting than singing. Everyone wanted to be louder, everyone ruder, everyone meaner. The songs were now just pretexts for cursing.

"Klaus, the king without a crown, is drinking himself to death on rat wages!" one roared, his voice already hoarse. Another giggled, drawing out the words: "His ship is rotten, his heart is empty—his rope laughs louder, more and more!"

Laughter, but no longer cheerful. It sounded like dogs about to bite.

Klaus was still sitting, cup in hand, eyes glittering. But his fingers drummed on the cup, hard, faster. The boy saw it and knew: this was no longer a game.

Then the one-eyed man rose, swaying, but his voice was firm: "A song for the truth! For the man who knows the sea! For the one who leads us when the other just jumps like a monkey!"

Some roared, others laughed nervously. Everyone knew who he meant.

"Shut up, One-Eye," growled one of the crew, an old fellow with scars on his face. "Everyone sings here, but no one will crown you with a song."

The one-eyed man grinned and slowly drew his knife. "Then I'll crown myself. And anyone who doesn't mind can dance right away."

The confinement exploded. Men jumped to their feet, cups tipped over, rats fled. Knives flashed, hands grabbed handles. It was no longer a song—it was war.

Klaus stood up, his own knife in his hand, and his laughter was now thunderous. "Enough singing, dogs! Now the blade decides who writes the ballad!"

The boy pressed himself into the corner, his heart racing, his eyes wide. He saw men attacking each other, steel flashing, blood spurting. It was no longer singing, it was a concert of screams and blades.

Bone Man finally moved. He stood up, took his club, and beat the first one down like a sack of flour. Not a word, just a blow. Another. Another. Men fell, not dead, but silent.

Silence spread, heavy, hard, breathless. Only the dripping of blood on wood remained.

Klaus stood there, the knife still in his fist, his chest heaving. He looked at the one-eyed man, who was grinning despite himself, his eyes full of hatred.

"Not yet," Klaus said quietly. "Not yet, dog." "Soon," the one-eyed man whispered back, barely audible but clear.

The boy realized: This wasn't the end. This was just a postponement. The ballads had awakened the knives. And knives never sleep for long.

Below deck, it smelled of iron. Blood always had the same smell, whether it came from a wound or a barrel: metallic, sharp, a taste that stuck in your throat like a hook.

The men sat scattered, staring at their hands, their knives, the wounds on their arms and faces. One held his stomach, his shirt dark red. Another whimpered softly, a cut across his cheek, his teeth visible underneath.

Klaus stood there, the knife still in his fist, but now he slowly put it away. "You dogs," he growled. "You're too stupid to sing, too stupid to fight, and too stupid to die. No wonder the Hanseatic League is already weaving ropes. You're not even worth hanging."

A murmur, quiet, dangerous. But no one objected. Not now. Not while Bone Man was still standing in the shadows with his club, his hands steady but ready.

Then it happened: The wounded man, clutching his stomach, collapsed. A wheeze, a twitch, and he fell silent. His eyes were still staring, wide open, as if asking, "That's it?"

Silence. Only the dripping of his blood running down the planks.

The one-eyed man broke the silence with a song. Quiet at first, scratchy, then louder: "A man, a cut, a drop of red – the sea sings on, we sing death."

Some laughed nervously, others joined in. Soon they were singing again, their voices ragged, cups clinking as if trying to break the silence. The song became a refrain: "One cut, one man, the sea is full – but we keep singing until one of us is flat."

It was sick, it was raw – but it was her comfort.

The boy saw the dead man, saw the men singing, as if it were all just a bad joke. He felt cold, not from the wind, but from the realization: On this ship, death was not the end. It was just a new verse in the song.

Klaus listened, grinning, but his eyes remained fixed. He knew these songs ate more than any bug. They ate away at respect, bit by bit, verse by verse.

Bone Man remained silent, as always. But the boy swore he heard him murmuring softly—not a song, not a ballad. Just a curse. A curse that no one but the sea could hear.

The voices swelled, louder, coarser, more unrestrained. It was no longer singing, it was a roar, a rage, a clawing at madness. The drunker they became, the wilder the verses sounded, like dogs barking at the moon, unaware that they're tearing themselves to pieces.

"The rope is soft, the beer is hard – we hang happily, but drink gently!" "One eye is enough, two are too many – a king stumbles, the sea plays games!" "Bone Man, you are so silent – your club speaks when no one wants to!"

Laughter, jeers, bangs on wood. Every name was twisted, every weakness sung about. Even the dead man on the floor got his little verse: "Hans lay flat, his stomach was empty – now salt is eating him, he won't sing anymore!"

That was their ritual. They mocked everything, even death. Perhaps death itself, because otherwise it would have consumed them.

The boy stood at the edge, his eyes wide, his heart pounding. He saw words turn into knives, laughter cut into scars. He understood: This was more dangerous than cannons. Cannons killed bodies. Songs killed respect.

Then Klaus stood up. Suddenly, harshly, the hammock swung empty. His shadow filled the room, his grin broad, his voice like thunder. "You want songs? Then hear one from me!"

He raised the cup; the men fell silent, half in anticipation, half in fear. Then he roared: "I don't give a shit about ropes, I don't give a shit about death—I'll drink the sea until it kills me!"

Silence for a breath. Then cheers erupted, wilder than before. Men stamped, shouted, clinked cups. Even the one-eyed man laughed, albeit with venom in his eyes.

Klaus grinned broadly, almost triumphantly. He had her back. Not through orders, not through fear—but through a song as dirty as she was.

The night ended in chorus, voices hoarse, bellies full of rum, heads empty. Bedbugs continued to bite, rats devoured bread, the dead man lay cold in the shadows. But the crew sang until their throats were sore, sang as if songs could drown out the rope.

The boy heard everything, every word, every note. And he knew: songs hold men together. But they also tear them apart. And this ship was both—a choir and a gallows.

A ship built of curses

At night, the "Colorful Cow" was a different animal. By day, she was just a ship—rough, battered, creaking under sail. But when darkness fell and the men lay silently in their hammocks, she began to breathe.

The wood didn't creak, it spoke. The beams groaned like old men rubbing their bones, and sometimes, when the wind stopped, you could hear a whisper in the rafters. No wind, no rat—words no one wanted to hear.

"She curses," muttered one, a scar across his forehead as he rubbed his knife. "The ship curses us." "She carries us," growled another. "Without her, we would have been dead long ago." "Or alive," hissed the first.

The men didn't argue about it loudly. They didn't talk too much about the "Colorful Cow." You could tell she was listening.

The boy often lay awake in the hammock, his ear against the wood. He swore he heard voices in it. Not clear, not loud—but like curses carved deep into the keel. Perhaps from the dead who died here, perhaps from the curses of the men themselves, spat into the wood every night.

One of the old men once said, drunk, that the "Colorful Cow" was built from planks taken from gallows. Wood that had already carried dead bodies. "That's why she hangs us all, even without a rope," he muttered before falling asleep and being robbed by rats.

Klaus loved the ship. He often walked the deck like a king through his palace. He stroked the railing as if it were flesh. "She is my queen," he once said as the boy watched him. "Men come and go. Rum comes and goes. But the cow stays. As long as she swims, I swim."

The one-eyed man spat every time he stepped onto the deck. "A floating grave, that's what it is. A coffin with sails. And you, Klaus, are the gravedigger." He didn't say it loud enough for Klaus to hear him—but loud enough for the crew to feel it.

Bone Man? He didn't say a word. He often stood on deck, his hand on the baton, his eye on the horizon. But sometimes—when the ship creaked, sighed, or whispered—he seemed to be listening. As if the "Bunte Kuh" were speaking directly to him.

The men cursed a lot, every day, every hour. But at some point, they realized that their curses no longer vanished into thin air. They hung in the wood, like nails hammered into a cross. The "Colorful Cow" bore them all. Every swear word, every threat, every insult. And the more they cursed, the more alive she seemed.

The boy knew: This wasn't a ship. This was a curse, nailed together from boards, salt, and hate.

And the curse laughed. Every night, when the sea was silent, the "Colorful Cow" laughed in her belly.

The wind had shifted, harsh and unpredictable. The "Bunte Kuh" stamped across the waves like a drunken animal, unsure whether it wanted to continue walking or die.

The men cursed, as always. At the ropes, at the sails, at the rats that swarmed over their feet. Curses filled their breath. But on this day, it seemed as if the ship had listened—and decided that one of them had to pay.

It happened quickly. The mainmast creaked, splintered, a wooden scream that went through his bones. Then a piece broke, heavy as a hellish blow. One of the men, a powerful dog with more scars than teeth, was in the wrong place at the

wrong time. The mast hit him on the head. A crack, like bones cracking in fire – and he was gone. Instantly.

Silence. Only wind and the creaking of broken wood.

No one moved. Not even Klaus. They all stared at what was left of the man: a skull that was more mush than bone.

Then someone whispered, his voice shaky: "The cow wanted it." "He vomited too much. Cursed too loudly. She heard it." "She takes whoever she wants."

The voices grew, like a wind blowing ever stronger. Men made signs against the evil eye; one carved a cross into the wood, another swallowed dryly as if he had tasted poison.

The boy stood beside it, his eyes wide. He saw not only the blood running across the deck. He saw it as the crew saw it: not as a coincidence, not as bad luck, but as a sacrifice. The ship had consumed it.

Klaus finally stepped forward, spat, and laughed harshly. "A ship is made of wood. Wood doesn't eat. But if any of you think the cow wants sacrifices, you'll soon give it yourselves. And believe me—it pukes faster than you think."

There was no laughter. Only silence, harsh, heavy, dangerous. The men didn't believe in coincidences. And they didn't believe in Klaus when he spoke against their horror.

The one-eyed man muttered, half to himself, half to the others: "A ship of curses eats cursers. And our captain spits the most."

The boy heard this, and he knew: the ship itself was now part of the conspiracy. Whether alive or not, in the minds of the crew, it was a goddess. A goddess made of wood, salt, and blood. And goddesses are always hungry.

The days that followed were a constant tangle of superstition. No one spoke openly about the man the mast had killed. But everyone knew: He hadn't fallen, he had been taken. And when a ship takes something, it wants more.

The first man secretly poured rum over the planks while he was on watch. A whole cup, not even licked. "For you, cow," he murmured. "Let's sail, let's live." The next morning, the wood smelled sweet and sticky. The men grinned crookedly and nodded. "She drinks too," one said.

Then it started. Coins disappeared. Small purses, hidden in cracks in the wood. Rat bones, gnawed clean, wedged into the ribs. One even cut his hand and smeared his blood on the railing. "She's starving, and we're feeding her," he said, his eyes glazed over.

The boy saw it all, silent, his heart like stone. He didn't know whether to laugh or vomit. Men who usually only thought about rum and whores now whispered prayers to the planks. They caressed the planks like women's skin, they spoke to the keel as if it could answer.

Klaus just snorted. "Idiots," he said when he saw them. "A ship eats wind and salt, nothing else." But he didn't stop them. Perhaps, the boy thought, because he knew that even mockery eventually sticks in the wood like a curse.

The one-eyed man did what he did best: he used it. "Don't you see?" he preached, half-aloud, his voice like poison in his ear. "The cow lives. She lives because we swear, because we drink, because we bleed. But ask yourself: who swears, who drinks, who bleeds the most? Our captain. And at some point, she'll want him. And if she takes him, we'll be free."

Some nodded, others remained silent. But the thought was there, burrowing into the wood like a worm.

The boy swallowed hard. He heard the ship creaking at night, and he swore he sometimes heard voices murmuring his name. Not loudly, not clearly. But there.

The "Bunte Kuh" wasn't just a ship. She was a mistress. And she had begun to demand sacrifices.

The storm came without warning. Sun still on the horizon, a golden evening – and then suddenly clouds, black, thick, heavy as the fists of a god. The wind raged like an animal caged for too long.

The "Bunte Kuh" howled. Not just the sails, not just the rigging—the entire ship screamed. The creaking of the planks sounded like voices, tortured, demanding, like a chorus of the dead.

The men ran, pulled reins, shouted orders. But it was no longer obedience; it was panic. One cursed, another cried, a third yelled: "She wants more! The cow wants more!"

Then lightning struck. A bright, dazzling strike, and the mast splintered like bone. A man pulling the ropes was struck, flew overboard, screamed once more—then only spray.

"A sacrifice!" one yelled, his face wet with rain and fear. "She's taken him!" "She wants more!" another screamed, tearing open his hand and splattering blood on the planks. "Drink, cow, drink!"

The boy clung to the railing, his heart pounding, his skin covered in rain and salt. He saw men throwing their coins into the sea, one even plunging his dagger into the wood as if the ship would swallow him. They gave, they prayed, they begged—for wood, for nails, for sails.

Klaus stood at the helm, his hair blowing in the wind, his eyes wild. He laughed, yelling against the storm: "She wants victims? Then she'll eat me first, if she can! But until then, she'll just eat the wind, because I tell her where it blows!"

His voice was lost in the thunder, but the boy heard it nonetheless. A laugh, defiant, insane. And he knew: That was the difference. The men believed the "Colorful Cow" was leading them. Klaus believed he was leading the "Colorful Cow."

But the storm raged, the ship screamed, and by the end of the night, two men were less in their hammocks. The sea had taken them—or the "cow," depending on who you asked.

The next morning, the ship looked like a scar, full of cracks, full of salt. The men didn't look at the sky, not at the sea. They looked into the wood. And they whispered: "She's alive. And she wants more."

The night after the storm was quiet, almost too quiet. No wind, no thunder, only the men's breathing and the rain dripping from the sails. The "Bunte Kuh" drifted like an exhausted animal, but its creaking sounded louder than usual. Like a heartbeat that wouldn't stop.

The crew crouched on deck, faces pale, eyes hollow. No one spoke of the two who hadn't returned. No one asked their names. Instead, they stared at the wood as if it were an altar.

The one-eyed man stood up, legs wide apart, knife loose at his belt. "Can't you hear?" he cried. "She lives. She speaks. She protects us, but she exacts a price. Every storm, every battle, every drop of blood we shed—everything belongs to her. Klaus doesn't lead us. The cow leads us!"

A murmur went through the men. A nod here, a whisper there. Some threw coins onto the planks, others poured drops of rum. It was no longer superstition—it was faith.

Klaus stepped forward slowly, his eyes narrowed, his smile crooked. "You idiots," he said calmly, so calmly that it sounded more dangerous than shouting. "A ship is wood. Wood floats. Wood carries us. Wood dies. But wood doesn't live."

“Then explain to us,” hissed the one-eyed man, “why she took two men while you were laughing like a devil at the wheel?”

Silence. Every eye was now on Klaus.

He laughed, harshly, roaringly, full of defiance. "Because she doesn't want me! Because I'm her king! The cow belongs to me, not to you, not to the sea, not to the ropes, not to the gods. To me! And as long as I breathe, she'll only eat if I allow her to!"

Some roared with applause, others remained silent, uncertain.

The boy stood in the shadows, his heart racing. He heard the words, he heard the creaking. And he knew: Both were lying. Klaus, the captain, and the one-eyed man, the agitator. Because the "Colorful Cow" belonged to neither of them. She belonged to herself.

He placed his hand on the railing, felt the salt, the wetness, the splinters. And he swore: the wood vibrated. Not from the sea, not from the wind—from life.

The "Bunte Kuh" was more than a ship. She was a kingdom, a queen, a gallows, and a grave. And whoever stood upon her belonged to her—with skin, with blood, with soul.

And somewhere in the silence she laughed. Not a creak, not a sigh—a laugh. Quiet, deep, full of hunger.

The drunken mutiny

The evening began like any other: with rum, with shouting, with songs so filthy that even the rats in the corners had to giggle. The "Bunte Kuh" rocked slightly on the sea, and down below, the men rocked even more.

Cups clinked, kegs were tapped, and soon the stench of spilled rum filled the air like the perfume of a whore who'd seen too many clients. One person pissed in the bucket, another pissed next to it, and everyone laughed as if it were the best ballad of the evening.

The boy held the cup in his hands, just sipping, while the world drowned around him. Men roared, danced on the planks, fell into the hammocks, vomited all over the ropes. It wasn't drinking anymore—it was a war on one's own liver.

The one-eyed man waited until throats were hot and heads were numb. Then he raised his voice, loud, clear, like a bell in the midst of chaos. "Brothers!" he roared. "Brothers, listen! We drink, we sing, we bleed—and for what? For whom?"

Some laughed, others stared at him.

“For Klaus!” one shouted, slurring his words and raising his arm. “For the cow!” another roared, and laughter followed.

The one-eyed man grinned, his eyes flashing. "Exactly! For Klaus or for the cow. But tell me – who sang the ropes around your necks? Who laughs when the Hanse whispers our names? Who feeds the ship blood? Isn't it Klaus who's drinking us all into the abyss?"

Unrest. Voices. Some nodded, some cursed, others called for more rum. But the seed had been sown, and the one-eyed man knew that booze was the best soil.

Klaus sat further back, his cup to his mouth, grinning broadly. He heard every word, but he just laughed, deep and throaty. "Keep singing, One-Eye. Preach your psalms. But don't forget: even drunken dogs bite the one who feeds them."

The men laughed again, but their laughter was brittle. The ship smelled of rum, of fear, of something that promised more than just drunkenness.

And the boy realized: Tonight it wouldn't just be songs. Today, someone would talk too much, someone would drink too much, and someone would bleed too much.

The voices swelled like a storm surge. What had just been babble and shouting now sounded like a chant of argument. Two men shouted at each other, one

pushed the other, the next laughed too loudly, and suddenly the mood was no longer one of celebration, but one bordering on madness.

"Klaus is going to drink us to death!" one yelled, his face red as fire. "Klaus is going to lead us to gold, you dog!" another yelled back.

Then the first fist rang out. No song, no cup—a fist, right in the face. Blood spurted, teeth flew, laughter erupted. Men jumped to their feet, tipped benches, grabbed knives.

The "Colorful Cow" cracked, deep, drawn-out, like a murmur. The boy swore the ship was laughing—laughing at their stupidity, at the rum, at the fists that were now flying like leaves in a storm.

Klaus was still sitting in the back, grinning broadly as if watching a play. But his grip on the cup tightened. His eyes flashed, not drunkenly, but alertly, sharply.

The one-eyed man took advantage of the chaos and yelled over the heads: "Don't you see? We're fighting because our king is wavering! He jumps first, he laughs last, and we're all caught in the middle!"

Some shouted applause, others threw cups at him, half laughed, the other half wanted to hit him. But everyone listened—and that was precisely his victory.

Bone Man stood at the edge, club loosely in his hand, his eyes cold. He didn't move yet. He waited, like an executioner who has already prepared the gallows but still wants to see who jumps willingly.

The boy ducked into a corner, his heart pounding in his ribs. He saw the first knives flash, blood drip from fists. It wasn't just drunk anymore. It was a beginning.

And the “Colorful Cow” creaked, quietly, greedily, as if it were counting how many were about to fall.

The roar turned into howling. Men staggered, sweating, hitting with fists, knives, and cups. Blood mixed with rum on the deck, sticky, stinking, a feast for the rats.

"A new captain!" one of them suddenly yelled, with a broken nose and a bloody mouth. "One who will lead us—not into the rope, but into gold!"

A murmur went through the narrow space, louder than the storm outside. The one-eyed man seized the moment, jumped onto a crate, his voice like a drumbeat: "Then take me! I see more with one eye than he does with two! I'll lead you, I'll give you gold, I'll give you freedom! Klaus laughs while you bleed!"

The crowd erupted, some shouting applause, others cursing. One shouted: "Klaus! What do you say, King? Or are you going to jump first again?"

Klaus finally stood up. Slowly. His grin was wide, but cold as steel. His shadow fell over the men, who immediately took a step back, even if they didn't want to.

"You want a new captain?" he growled, his voice deep and raspy. "Then look for him in the cow's ass. Because that's where you're all already sitting. And if anyone thinks they can do better than me, then let them step forward."

Silence. Only the cracking of wood, the men's breathing.

The one-eyed man grinned, raised his knife, the blade glinting in the torchlight. "Here I stand, Klaus. Your kingdom is a barrel of rum and a pile of shit. Let's see whose song the crew sings tomorrow."

The men held their breath. The boy felt the air become heavy, thicker than smoke, denser than salt. It was no longer booze, no longer a ballad. It was the beginning of war.

And somewhere deep in the belly of the "Colorful Cow," the wood cracked. Not like wood—like laughter.

The confines vibrated. Men stood close together, eyes red, hands damp, fists clenched. Everyone knew: one wrong word, one wrong breath—and blood would spray like rain in a storm.

The one-eyed man jumped from the box and landed hard, knife in hand. "Now, brothers!" he cried. "No more king, no more fool, no more rope! We take what's ours!"

Some roared their approval, others reached for their blades. One lunged forward, his face contorted by drunkenness—but before he could reach Klaus, something crashed.

A blow, dull, like wood on flesh. Bone Man had moved. Silently, without a word. His club struck the man on the skull, and he fell like a sack of salt.

Silence, for a heartbeat. Then another blow. Bone Man struck down the next one who had flinched. No words, no curses, just clubs and groans.

"Back," he finally said, his voice so quiet it was louder than any roar. "Back, dogs."

The men staggered, staggered, blood running down their faces, one laughed nervously, another spat. No one dared to attack him. The club wasn't a tool—it was a judgment.

The one-eyed man stopped, grinning crookedly, but his eye flickered. "A dog who beats for his master. That's all you are, Bone Man."

Klaus laughed, loudly, deeply, and stepped forward. His knife flashed. "Then come on, One-Eye. Show me how to steer a ship. Show me how to live when your belly is already screaming for the rope."

The men held their breath, fists shaking, their voices muffled. The boy felt the ship beneath his feet, creaking and trembling. As if the "Bunte Kuh" were waiting—waiting for blood to seep deeper into the wood.

And for a moment he knew: Today will decide who she belongs to: Klaus. The One-Eyed Man. Or himself.

The air was thick as pitch. No wind, no song, no laughter. Only breathing, hard and short, like that of dogs about to pounce on each other.

Klaus stood broadly, the knife held loosely in his hand as if it were merely a drinking utensil. But his eyes were sharp, sparkling, full of hunger. The one-eyed man opposite, his grin crooked, his knife higher, firmer, a man who finally sensed the hour he had dreamed of.

"Who do you want?" roared the one-eyed man, his voice like thunder. "One who jumps like a monkey, who laughs when you bleed? Or one who sees what's coming? One who will set you free?"

Some men shouted, others ducked, too drunk to vote. But the words hung heavy in the air, like a net draped over everyone.

Klaus laughed. Loud, throaty, full of venom. "Freedom?" He spat on the ground. "You are free, you dogs—free to drink, free to vomit, free to die. And I am free to lead you, because none of you have the balls to raise a knife against me."

A murmur, a step, a twitch. A man raised his blade—and hesitated. Bone Man saw it, stepped forward, his club raised only slightly. No blow this time, just a glance. The man dropped the blade, hissed back like a beaten dog.

The ship creaked. Loud, prolonged, like thunder erupting from the planks. The men froze. Some murmured prayers, others clutched their necks as if they could already feel the rope.

The boy stood trembling, his eyes wide. He knew: This was no accident. The ship itself was making a decision. It wasn't waiting for blood—it demanded it.

Klaus and the One-Eyed Man circled each other, knives flashing, breath like fire. And in the men's faces lay naked fear: not that one of them would die—but that in the end they would all die because the ship wanted a new king.

The creaking grew louder, a sound like laughter, deep within the belly of the "Colorful Cow." The men held their breath as Klaus and the One-Eyed Man stared at each other—two wolves just waiting for the first to twitch.

Then it happened. The one-eyed man leaped forward, his knife flashing. Klaus half-stepped aside, faster than anyone would have expected when he was drunk. The blade sliced into his arm, blood spurted across the planks. A scream, a roar, the crowd trembled.

Klaus laughed. He grabbed the one-eyed man, rammed his knee into his stomach, and drew his own knife across his shoulder. Blood against blood, two red streams mingling across the wood.

"That's enough!" Bone Man roared, and this time his voice was like thunder. He jumped in, the club slicing like lightning, crashing against the railing, sending splinters flying. "One more, and I'll kill you both!"

Silence. Breathless, trembling.

The men saw blood, smelled it, almost tasted it on their lips. But no one moved. They saw the two leaders, both injured, both bleeding, both grinning—and neither defeated.

Klaus wiped the blood from his arm and spat on the ground. "Not yet, One-Eye. Not yet." The one-eyed man grinned crookedly, his face contorted, his shoulder red. "Soon, Klaus. Soon."

The men stared, spellbound, caught between fear and hope, hatred and loyalty. No one knew who he belonged to now.

The boy stood trembling, his heart pounding. He saw the blood on the planks, the wood absorbing it like thirst. And he swore he heard it crackling – as if the "Colorful Cow" had drunk, as if she had decided: Both are still needed. Still.

The night ended not with a victory, but with a silence that was louder than any roar.

And the “cow” creaked, full, satisfied, like a whore who knew that the men would always pay, no matter how much she sucked them dry.

Freedom stinks of fish and beer

The harbor smelled of everything the men had missed—and everything they would have been better off forgetting. Fish that had been rotting in the sun for days. Beer spilled from taverns and fermenting in the cracks of the alleys. Sweat, piss, feces. Freedom stank, and the "Colorful Cow" vomited its men right into the middle of it.

The crew staggered along the planks, screaming, singing, laughing. Weeks at sea had turned them into animals, and now they ran like dogs finally off the leash. Everyone was looking for what they thought they needed most: whores, beer, dice games, fights.

Klaus led the way like a king. His chin held high, his grin wide, his eyes shining. He was celebrated, not by the crowd—they barely knew him—but by his own dogs, who accompanied him with hoots and laughter. "Our king!" they cried. "The lord of the sea!" Klaus laughed, and the harbor laughed along with him.

The one-eyed man stayed in the shadows. He drank, yes, he cursed, yes—but his eyes searched, counted. Who nodded when he spoke? Who followed him into the darker alleys? Who laughed when he whispered a mockery of Klaus? He didn't rely on cups—he relied on doubt.

Bone Man disappeared at some point, as always. No one knew where he went. Some said he drank alone. Others swore he talked to the dead in the cemetery. The boy only knew: he was there when things went wrong. Always.

And he himself? He stood in the middle of it all, his eyes wide, his lungs filled with the stench. It wasn't freedom, it was a market. Everything was for sale: bodies, cups, dice, lives. And the men bought as if there were no tomorrow. Perhaps, the boy thought, they truly believed there wasn't.

The harbor absorbed them like a maw, and only spat them out again when they were empty, sick, or dead.

And that's exactly what they called freedom.

The first tavern they invaded was nothing more than a hole. Its walls were crooked wood, and its roof was so leaky that you couldn't tell if it was rain or piss from the upstairs. But the beer flowed, the rum flowed faster, and that was enough.

The men screamed when they saw the barrels. Coins clinked across the bar, knives flashed when someone thought they were being poured too little. Soon the tables were lined with jugs, and the floor glistened stickily with spills.

The boy pressed himself against the wall and watched as the first fights began. There was no need for a reason—just a fake laugh, a fake look. A fist flew, a mug shattered, and someone was on the ground, nose red, mouth full of splinters. Laughter, jeers, more beer.

Klaus sat in the middle of it all, like a prince on his throne. He drank faster, laughed louder, and hit harder when someone bumped into him. Every hit was proof that he was alive. Every cup was proof that he ruled.

The one-eyed man sat off to the side, drinking more slowly. But he grinned as the fights grew louder. "See it?" he murmured to the men beside him. "This isn't freedom. This is madness. And whoever leads it will lead it to the grave. A grave with a stupid grin."

The men nodded hesitantly. Not yet ready to speak aloud, but they were listening. And the one-eyed man knew: every cup that made Klaus bigger also made him more vulnerable.

A sailor from the crew finally grabbed a stranger by the collar and shouted in his face that he'd been looking at him askance. The knife flashed, blood splattered on the bar. The tavern exploded. Everyone was against everyone else, tables crashed, benches flew, the barman roared—and then laughed as he picked up the coins that rolled across the floor.

The boy crouched lower, his hands over his ears. Freedom stank, and now it tasted of blood.

And outside, at the harbor, the wood of the “Colorful Cow” cracked, as if it too were listening, hungry for the chaos that fed its men.

The taverns spat them out like vomit after too much rum, and they rolled into the alleys, staggering into brothels that smelled of sweat and cheap perfume. Doors stood open, red lights burned, voices beckoned. "Come in, sailors! Golden shells, silken beds, hot thighs!"

The men followed like cattle. One stumbled with his trousers already half-open, another barely had any coins, but already had a woman in his arms, who was just laughing because she knew he was about to fall asleep from his drunkenness.

The boy stumbled after them, his eyes wide open. He saw the whores—young, old, toothless, tattooed. Some were laughing, some seemed tired, some had eyes so cold that you knew they'd seen too many men die.

Klaus walked in like a king. Two women on his arms, a third already reaching for his belt. "Freedom, brothers!" he roared. "This is what it smells like, this is what it tastes like, this is what it fucks like!" The men laughed, sang, and roared. One fell off his chair, one fell asleep in a woman's lap while she emptied his pockets.

The one-eyed man stayed at the edge, drank, looked. His eyes were sharper than his tongue. "This is how kings die," he murmured. "Not by the rope. By the thigh that sucks them dry." He laughed, but it wasn't a laugh—more like a promise.

The air became heavier, filled with groans, laughter, and the stench of disease. The boy smelled it, even without knowing what syphilis was called. He saw men sweating, groaning, and he knew many would not return healthy. Freedom was a disease lurking in every womb.

Later, one of them, half-naked, with a bottle in his hand, sang a ballad about a whore more beautiful than the sea. He sang off-key, he sang loudly, and the men roared along until the walls shook.

And outside, at the harbor, a wind blew that smelled of salt. But no one heard it—everyone was too deep in what they called freedom: a damp hole that tasted of beer, sweat, and foul breath.

The night was still young, but the coins were already clinking like death bells. Hardly any of them had any gold in their pockets—it lay on tables, rolled across boards, and disappeared into the hands of crooks who rolled dice faster than you could blink.

The crew fell into it like blind cows. Dice, cards, betting on cockfights, even betting on backyard brawls. Everything was allowed, everything was cheating. But they laughed, they screamed, they believed they were winning because the rum made them believe it.

The boy stood by, staring at the dice clattering as if they had a life of their own. He knew none of them would ever win. He saw the cardsharps' quick fingers, the marked cards, the smiles that had more teeth than a shark. But the men didn't see it—or they didn't want to.

Klaus laughed the loudest. He tossed coins like breadcrumbs, shouted that he was king, and when he lost, he laughed even harder, as if he had invented the whole game. For him, it wasn't a loss; it was just further proof that he was free—free to take anything and lose it all again.

The one-eyed man didn't play. He stood, drank, watched, and when one of his men fell, he grabbed him by the shoulder and whispered in his ear. "Klaus laughs while you lose. Do you think he'll feed you when your purse is empty?" Some nodded, some grumbled. More seeds, more doubt.

Later, when the gold was truly gone, some men knocked over the dice cups, drew knives, and shouted for fair play. Fair play came in the form of fists and blades, and the back alley soon smelled of blood and old beer.

The boy ducked, feeling the chaos raging, and thought: Freedom is nothing more than another word for loss.

And out in the harbor lay the “Bunte Kuh,” silent, waiting, as if she knew that her men were bleeding themselves dry.

The morning smelled worse than the night. The first light fell on alleys filled with vomit, puddles of beer, and men who looked like drowned dogs washed ashore. The brothels spat out their last customers, the taverns closed their doors, and the dice were still rolling, even though no one had any coins left.

The crew crawled back to the harbor, one by one, battered, empty, groaning. One was bleeding from a temple, one was clutching his stomach as if the knife

was still in his hand, one was laughing hysterically and simply fell down, right in the dirt.

Klaus arrived last, staggering but laughing. Two women on his arms, who had already hidden half of his loot in their clothes. He looked like a king who had just lost his kingdom, yet he grinned as if he had betrayed the world. "That was freedom!" he roared. "Freedom, you dogs!"

The men cheered weakly, some almost throwing themselves into the dirt just to nod. But most just stared, their eyes hollow, their pockets empty. Freedom had drained them dry, and they were glad to crawl back onto the "Colorful Cow," which at least wasn't wearing a smile.

The one-eyed man walked silently, his grin small but sharp. He didn't need words. The men saw it for themselves: Klaus laughed, they starved. Klaus fucked, they bled. The seed grew on its own.

The boy followed them, his heart heavy, his stomach empty. He had seen how they celebrated their freedom – and he knew: this wasn't a celebration. It was a trade. Gold for disease. Rum for blood. Body for hope.

And the "Colorful Cow" lay there, silent, creaking, as if she'd been waiting. She took it back like a mother holding her bastards in her arms, no matter what they've done. But there was something cold in its creaking, as if it were whispering: "You call that freedom? You fools. I'll show you what truly free means."

The "Colorful Cow" creaked as the men crawled back. It wasn't a welcome, it was the cracking of rotten wood that knew: These dogs keep coming back. No matter how much they lose outside, no matter how much they drink, how many whores they fuck, how many dice they throw in the dirt – in the end, they end up here.

One fell directly onto the planks, asleep with saliva running from the corner of his mouth. Another vomited over the railing, and the sea took it as indifferently as it would any man when his hour struck.

Klaus stood at the helm, barefoot, his shirt open, his eyes bloodshot but his grin fresh. "Well, you dogs? Has freedom ripped your asses off?" The crew laughed weakly, some spat, some cried. But they nodded as if it were the truth.

"That was freedom," Klaus repeated, more quietly this time, almost to himself. "Fuck chains, fuck kings, fuck the Hanseatic League. Freedom is beer, fish, whores, and blood. That's all you need."

The one-eyed man stood at the stern, his face shadowed. He didn't laugh, he didn't nod. He looked at the men throwing themselves into the hammocks like dead fish. He saw Klaus standing with his legs spread at the helm. And he saw the "cow" that carried them all. And he knew: at some point, the wood would decide who was truly the captain.

Bone Man sat in the shadows, arms crossed, club beside him. No one dared to speak to him. He was there, he was always there. And that was enough.

The boy lay down in the hammock, the smell of the harbor still in his nostrils. He thought of the alleys, the whores, the dice, the stench. And he knew: freedom was just another word for unseen chains. Chains of beer, of greed, of fake laughter.

The ship rocked gently, and its creaking sounded as if it were whispering: "You fools. You have no idea. True freedom doesn't wait in the harbor. It waits on the sea. And it will eat you all."

The Whore of Hamburg

The dive was filled with smoke, rum, and voices that sounded like cheap living. Men yelled, women laughed, dice rolled, and mugs smashed. A normal harbor hole—until she came.

She entered as if the night belonged to her. The door creaked, the smoke receded as if afraid of her. A woman, tall, lithe, her eyes black as wet wood that had seen too many floods. Her dress was red, but not new. Her smile was broad, but not friendly.

Klaus saw her first. He sat there, his feet up on the table, the mug in his hand, and his grin vanished for a moment. Just one. Then he raised the mug as if he'd been waiting for her. "Well, Hamburg," he said loudly, his voice like a thud. "Finally, you've sent me your most beautiful curse piece."

The crew laughed, roared, and knocked. But their eyes were glued to her. She was no ordinary whore. Not one who merely offered her body and took the

coins. She had a way about her, as if she had already stripped kings, as if she had kissed gallows wood and mocked ropes.

The one-eyed man grinned, but his eye flickered. "The whore of Hamburg," he murmured, barely audibly. "Whoever lies with her never wakes up the same."

The boy stared, his throat dry. He had seen many women in brothels who smiled like knives and moaned like merchants. But she was different. She looked at him, just briefly, and he swore: she saw right through him, down to the salt in his veins.

She didn't go to just any table. She went straight to Klaus. She sat on his lap, reached for his mug, drank deeply, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Well, Captain," she said, her voice ragged, warm, like rum burning in the throat. "Show me how free a man truly is."

And the “Bunte Kuh” out in the harbor cracked as if it had heard it.

Klaus put his arm around her as if he'd always known her. His laughter returned, loud, raw, and the men around him roared as if they were all in a play performed just for them. "Do you see it, you dogs?" he roared. "Hamburg herself brought me the crown. Dressed in red, with thighs worth more than gold!"

The crew roared, clinked glasses, and sang filthy songs. One beat the beat with a knife on the table, another almost fell off his chair, from laughter or drunkenness, no one knew which.

But the whore didn't laugh. She drank, she smoked, she looked at Klaus as if he were just another customer—and at the same time the only one who ever mattered. A gaze so sharp it could cut through even the rum haze.

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, his face dark. "A king who lets himself be led by a whore is no king," he murmured to the men beside him. "He sells us all for a smile. Do you want to follow someone who's dying in his lap?" Some nodded hesitantly. Others looked at Klaus, doubts gnawing quietly.

Klaus kissed her roughly, his hand moving as if he wanted to let the entire bar know that he was now her master. But the men who were watching closely—and the boy was watching closely—noted something: It wasn't Klaus holding her. It was her who had a firm grip on him. His hand was rough, yes, but hers was more secure.

"You think you're free," she whispered, so quietly that only he could hear. "But no man is free. Not from the sea, not from the rope, not from me." Klaus laughed, but his laughter was a heartbeat too late.

The crew cheered, rapped, and sang. For them, it was a spectacle, a triumph for their captain. But the boy felt the wood taut beneath his feet, as if the "Bunte Kuh" too had heard a new rope being knotted—not of hemp, but of skin and breath.

The night crept deeper, like a creeping fog. Rum flowed, dice rattled, songs swelled, then died away again. But around Klaus and the whore, a web of its own was spun, thicker, darker.

She sat on his lap, smoking slowly, drawing the smoke deep into her lungs as if it were the air itself. Her eyes held him. Every time he laughed, grinned, or screamed, she pulled him back with a glance. And he, the man who had mocked entire fleets, listened to her like an apprentice.

"You think you're leading men," she breathed, stroking the scar on his cheek. "But you're only leading them where you yourself will drown."

Klaus grinned, but his forehead glistened with sweat. "I am the king of the sea, woman. I jump first, I die last. No one guides me."

Her laugh was deep, ragged, full of weariness and mockery at the same time. "Kings are the first to fall. And when your head rolls, the rats dance on the deck."

The crew saw only two people hugging, kissing, drinking. But the boy saw more. He saw Klaus's hands shaking, not from the rum, but from what her words were tearing inside him. He saw how the grin no longer came from defiance, but from fear that the men might notice the rupture.

The one-eyed man grinned from the darkness. "Look at him," he whispered, and a few men heard. "Great Klaus, bound by a woman. Tomorrow she'll lead us, not him." He laughed softly, and the seed grew deeper.

The whore leaned into Klaus's ear, whispering so softly that only he heard. "You are strong, Captain. But the sea is stronger. And I am the sea."

Klaus swallowed, then laughed loudly again, pushed her away, drank, and grabbed her throat as if to show who was in charge. But she let him—and her eyes laughed as if he'd caught himself in the net.

Outside, at the harbor, the “Bunte Kuh” creaked like an animal that sensed that the storm that could tear it apart was not sitting in the mast, but on Klaus’s lap.

The tavern was a battlefield of cups, blood, and laughter. Men lay under the tables, one with his trousers still halfway down, one with a knife in his thigh, both laughing as if it were a game. Songs swelled, off-key, loud, off-key, but with a power that shook the walls and hearts.

Klaus stood on the table, the whore beside him, both raising their mugs like king and queen, and the crew went wild. "Freedom!" they roared. "Freedom and blood!" Klaus laughed, poured rum over his beard, let her drink it, kissed her so roughly it looked as if he wanted to bite her.

But she stood like a ruler. Her every move was sure, silent, unshakable. She needed no sword, no crown—she already had the men. Her eyes swept over them, and everyone she looked at unconsciously lowered their gaze.

The boy saw it, and despite the noise, he felt cold. She wasn't just a woman. She was a force. Like the sea itself: alluring, beautiful, deadly. Anyone who thought they could capture her drowned.

The one-eyed man drank in the shade, his grin deep. "See?" he murmured to his listeners. "He's not a captain anymore. He's a fool. She's got him on a rope, and we're hanging with her." A few men nodded, others laughed at him. But the words hung in the air, like smoke that can't be wiped away.

Klaus jumped from the table, grabbed the whore, and pulled her into the corner, laughing and screaming. The crew cheered as if it were their victory. But the boy saw the wood creaking beneath them, the ship responding out in the harbor, even though it was far away.

It was as if the “Colorful Cow” was creaking jealously—jealous that Klaus had fallen victim to another storm, a storm in human skin.

And the boy knew: Tonight they were laughing. But tomorrow, maybe even tomorrow, someone would cry.

The laughter grew tired, the roaring hoarse. Men lay on the tables like felled trees, the floor a swamp of beer, blood, and vomit. The candles flickered as if they were finally about to be blown out, and the songs died away in half-swallowed tones.

The whore and Klaus disappeared into an adjoining room. The door closed behind them, and the crew cheered once more, weakly but with the last vestiges of pride. "Our captain is fucking Hamburg himself!" one roared before sliding unconscious from his chair.

The one-eyed man stayed awake. He drank more slowly, his eyes sharper than the knife at his belt. "This is how a king dies," he murmured. "Not at sea, not on the gallows. But in the womb, sucking him dry." A few men heard, nodded, and memorized the words, even if they were too drunk to comprehend them.

The boy sat in a corner, his knees drawn up, his heart heavy. He heard the groaning from the next room, heard the clinking of a cup, the dull creaking of a bed. And he felt the world tilt. Klaus was strong, yes, but he was also just a man. A man now held by a woman who was more of a curse than a blessing.

Outside, at the harbor, a wind blew. The wood of the "Colorful Cow" creaked as if it were restlessly lying in the water. Almost like an animal sensing its owner—and not sure if he'll return the same.

The tavern fell silent. Only the groans from the next room and the snoring of the men remained. And the boy knew: the night had changed more than a dozen battles.

Because sometimes the worst storm is not the one that tears the sails to pieces – but the one that eats into the heart.

Morning crept through the cracks like a thief, bringing with it all the grayness the night had hidden. The tavern stank of stale beer, cold smoke, and cheap perfume. Men awoke coughing, with heads heavier than anchors and stomachs that rebelled with every movement.

Klaus stepped out of the next room. His shirt was open, his neck covered in scratches, his eyes red as embers. His grin was there, big and wide, but it seemed drawn, as if he had to hold it in before it slipped off his face. "Well, you dogs," he roared in a raspy voice, "did you enjoy Hamburg?"

The crew cheered weakly, half dead, half proud. Some laughed, others cursed, one vomited directly onto the table. They saw their captain, the victor of the night—and yet they whispered, whispering behind the cup, wondering if he hadn't lost more than he had won.

The one-eyed man grinned in the shadows, his eyes cold. "There he is," he murmured to those sitting next to him. "The king whose crown Hamburg is

fucking off his head. Do you think someone like that will lead us to victory? Or will he lead us straight to the grave?" Some nodded, others stared at Klaus, and the poison crept deeper.

The whore had disappeared. No one had seen her leave, but everyone knew she hadn't simply vanished—she remained in people's minds, in their eyes, in the smell that still hung in the air. She was like a curse that couldn't be washed away.

The boy felt it most keenly. He saw Klaus, strong yet weaker. He heard the men, loud yet quieter in their faith. He heard the creaking of the "Bunte Kuh" out in the harbor—a long, deep groan, as if it knew the night had caused more damage than any storm.

The sun rose, golden over Hamburg, but in the hearts of the crew only gray remained.

And the "Whore of Hamburg" was laughing somewhere, unseen, and everyone knew: She wasn't finished with them. Not by a long shot.

When the wind smells of corpses

It began on a morning that seemed harmless enough. The sun was rising, the sea was calm, the sails billowed in the wind. But then a smell arrived – faint, insidious, like a thief creeping through cracks. At first barely noticeable, then so pungent that even the seagulls in the distance flew away, screeching.

"Do you smell that?" one of the men murmured as he reeled in the line. "Fish," said another, but his face twisted. "But not fresh. Rotten fish." A third swallowed, spat, and cursed: "That's not fish. That's a corpse."

The word immediately hung heavy in the air, as if it had weight of its own. Men paused, staring at the sea, as if bloated bodies must be floating somewhere. But the waves were empty, smooth, innocent. Only the smell remained, thicker, sweeter, like flesh left in the sun too long.

Klaus laughed loudly, as if trying to nip the word in the bud. "You dogs! You smell ghosts. The sea eats faster than it can stink." He poured rum over his lips, wiped his mouth, and grinned. "If you're afraid of ghosts, you should tie the rope around your own necks."

But the men didn't laugh along. They sniffed, murmured, and looked over the railing. Some made the sign against the devil, others spat three times into the sea. Superstition crawled through the ship's belly like rats.

The boy stood still, his hands damp, his breath heavy. He smelled it too. Not just fish, not just sea. It was sweeter, rottener, heavier. It smelled like the harbor cemetery when the graves burst open under the rain. It smelled of death—and he knew he was right.

And the “Colorful Cow” creaked, quietly, as if it had been holding its breath.

The stench didn't subside. It remained, whether the men changed sails, opened hatches, or tipped the bucket full of salt water over the deck. It crept into their noses, their throats, and their sleep. Even the bread they ate tasted as if it had worms in it.

"One of us is carrying death on board," muttered one as night fell. "Shut up," snarled another. "That's not how you talk at sea." "Yes!" cried the first, "I've smelled it since we left Hamburg. One of us is already rotten, inside. The wind says so."

The words gnawed into their minds like rats. Soon the men were looking at each other suspiciously, whispering, cursing. Some spat when the one-eyed man passed by. Others avoided the boy, as if afraid his youth was a bad omen.

Klaus was still laughing, but his laughter sounded dull and hoarse. "You fools! The sea sometimes stinks because it's alive. Have you forgotten how many we threw overboard in the last storm? Perhaps their bones are laughing beneath you right now."

But the men didn't nod. They looked at him, and in their eyes lay the question that no one wanted to ask out loud:*And what if you are the one who leads us to the grave?*

The one-eyed man let the poison grow. He sat in small groups, whispered curses, and told old stories in which captains were cursed by the dead for taking more than the sea would give. "The smell of corpses always means the same thing," he said quietly. "One of them is going to die soon. And maybe he'll take us with him."

The boy lay down in the hammock, his nose fed up with the sweet stench. He knew: It wasn't just the sea. It was within them. In their stomachs, in their minds, in their corrupted freedom. They already carried death within them.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned under the wind as if to confirm:*Yes. One of you is already rotting.*

It began on the second morning. One of the men, Hinnerk, a man with arms like ropes, crouched over the railing and vomited until nothing but bile came out. His face was gray, his eyes sunken, his skin damp like old leather.

“Death has marked him!” one shouted, and ten people stood around him, their knives half drawn, as if they had to protect themselves, as if Hinnerk himself were already a corpse.

"Shut up!" Klaus barked, stomped across the deck, grabbed the sick man by the collar, and pulled him up. "The man just drank too much in Hamburg. If you throw up, you're still alive!" He laughed, but no one laughed with him.

Hinnerk collapsed, wheezing, and from his throat came a smell worse than anything before. Sweet, putrid, like an open grave lid. The men backed away, one made the sign of the cross, another spat three times on the wood. "That's the sign!" he yelled. "One of them is dying, and the wind already knows it!"

Panic spread like fire. Everyone suspected each other. Some grabbed Hinnerk, ready to throw him overboard as if he were ballast. "Throw him into the sea!" they shouted. "Or he'll eat us all!"

The one-eyed man stepped forward, his voice cold and cutting. "Do you see?" he shouted. "The wind doesn't lie. One rots, and the captain laughs about it. Do you want to wait until the whole boat stinks?" He looked directly at Klaus, and the words burrowed into his head like worms.

Klaus reached for his sword, his eyes glowing. "No one throws anyone overboard here as long as I'm alive!" he thundered. "Hinnerk stays, and if he dies, we'll bury him like men. Anyone who thinks otherwise can face me right now!"

Silence. Only the wheezing of the sick man and the creaking of the "Colorful Cow." The men backed away, but their eyes remained filled with doubt.

The boy stood still, his heart pounding. He saw Klaus's rage, the one-eyed man with his poison, the men with their shaking hands. And he knew: The smell wasn't just coming from the sick man. It was coming from all of them.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked deeply, as if it were sighing:*Soon you will have your first death.*

By the third day, Hinnerk was nothing but skin and stench. He lay in the hammock like an empty sack, his eyes glassy, his lips blue. He wheezed, gasping for air as if he already had the sea in his lungs. No one went near him anymore. Even Klaus kept his distance, though he bared his teeth like a dog that doesn't want to show that he's afraid.

Then, at sunset, came the last breath. A gasping sound, half gurgle, half whistle, then silence. Hinnerk's head fell to the side, and his body emitted the sweetest, most disgusting odor anyone had ever smelled.

"He's dead!" someone shouted, and panic immediately swept across the deck. "Get him overboard, now!" Knives flashed, hands ripped at the hammock. "Into the sea, into the sea, before he poisons us all!"

Klaus stepped forward, his voice roaring, but rougher than usual. "Wait! We'll bury him like men, not like dogs!" But the crew didn't hear. They were beside themselves, their eyes wide, sweat pouring down their foreheads, as if they themselves were already on the rope.

The one-eyed man intervened, one eye sparkling. "Let the sea eat him," he cried. "That's the custom. It's the only thing that will purify us." And the men cried out, nodding, grabbing, pulling.

They hastily wrapped Hinnerk in canvas, tied a piece of iron to his feet, and then, without a song or a prayer, they threw him overboard. A dull splash, a few blisters, and he was gone.

But the smell remained. Worse still, the wind seemed to carry it onward, sweet and rotten, as if it hadn't taken death with it but dispersed it among them.

The boy stood at the bow, his hands clammy. He felt the men whispering, muttering that one wasn't enough. That the wind wanted more. He felt the fear growing, like a second storm, invisible but stronger than any gust.

And the “Bunte Kuh” groaned as if it itself felt the weight – not of Hinnerk, but of the living dead still on board.

By the third day, Hinnerk was nothing but skin and stench. He lay in the hammock like an empty sack, his eyes glassy, his lips blue. He wheezed, gasping for air as if he already had the sea in his lungs. No one went near him anymore. Even Klaus kept his distance, though he bared his teeth like a dog that doesn't want to show that he's afraid.

Then, at sunset, came the last breath. A gasping sound, half gurgle, half whistle, then silence. Hinnerk's head fell to the side, and his body emitted the sweetest, most disgusting odor anyone had ever smelled.

"He's dead!" someone shouted, and panic immediately swept across the deck. "Get him overboard, now!" Knives flashed, hands ripped at the hammock. "Into the sea, into the sea, before he poisons us all!"

Klaus stepped forward, his voice roaring, but rougher than usual. "Wait! We'll bury him like men, not like dogs!" But the crew didn't hear. They were beside themselves, their eyes wide, sweat pouring down their foreheads, as if they themselves were already on the rope.

The one-eyed man intervened, one eye sparkling. "Let the sea eat him," he cried. "That's the custom. It's the only thing that will purify us." And the men cried out, nodding, grabbing, pulling.

They hastily wrapped Hinnerk in canvas, tied a piece of iron to his feet, and then, without a song or a prayer, they threw him overboard. A dull splash, a few blisters, and he was gone.

But the smell remained. Worse still, the wind seemed to carry it onward, sweet and rotten, as if it hadn't taken death with it but dispersed it among them.

The boy stood at the bow, his hands clammy. He felt the men whispering, muttering that one wasn't enough. That the wind wanted more. He felt the fear growing, like a second storm, invisible but stronger than any gust.

And the “Bunte Kuh” groaned as if it itself felt the weight – not of Hinnerk, but of the living dead still on board.

The day chewed its way across the sky, gray and sunless. The sea was smooth as oil, yet the wind roared in the sails as if laughing—hoarse, stinking, full of death.

Klaus stood at the helm, his face red, his eyes flashing. "You're letting air drive you crazy!" he yelled. "Air, you dogs!" He slammed his fist against the wood, making it crack. "I'm your captain, and anyone who says otherwise can spill their blood all over the planks!"

Then it came: a blow. Small at first, but loud enough for everyone to hear. One of the men had slammed his fist against the railing—not directly against Klaus,

not yet, but close enough. A growl rippled through the crew, dull, dangerous, like the rumble of a storm still gathering.

The one-eyed man stepped forward, broad, with that cold grin. "He doesn't fear the wind, but we all smell it. Maybe he's already lazy, our captain. Maybe the sea wants him first."

A few men nodded, spoke loudly, and shouted. "If the wind doesn't want the captain, then...!" One drew his knife, half hesitant, half driven. But before he could raise it, Bone Man arrived.

Without a word, he stepped out of the shadows, grabbed the man with the knife, and struck him down with a single blow. The body crashed to the planks, blood flowed from the nose, and silence fell over the deck.

"Enough," Bone Man growled, for the first time that day. "Anyone who rebels against the captain will die before the sea can claim them."

The crew stepped back, intimidated, but the doubt remained. It crept into their eyes, their fists, their hearts.

The boy stood still, his heart pounding, while the wind continued to stank. He knew: This was only the beginning. Today a fist, tomorrow a knife, soon blood.

And the “Colorful Cow” creaked as if it knew: The wind smelled of corpses because it would soon have some.

The treasure that wasn't one

It was just after noon, the sun blazing, when the lookout shouted, "Sail to starboard!" Immediately, the "Bunte Kuh" was a different animal. Men leaped like rats over the planks, hauling ropes, shouting, laughing. The fatigue, the stench, the dead faces—all gone, replaced by greed, that old fire that was stronger than rum.

Klaus grabbed the wheel, his hair in the wind, and roared: "Here comes our reward, you dogs! Gold, silver, everything those fine gentlemen have hoarded is now ours!" His voice was so loud that the seagulls fluttered.

The men roared, everyone already imagining the treasures: chests full of coins, barrels full of wine, jewelry to hang around the women's necks. The fear of the

past few days turned into a frenzy, as if a few shiny pieces could bring the dead back to life.

The one-eyed man stood more still than the others, but there was a grin on his face. Not the wide, open grin, but the narrow, cold grin. He saw the burning hunger in the men's eyes—and knew it would soon burn even hotter when they realized that hunger cannot be quenched with gold.

The boy climbed onto the railing, his hands clammy. He saw the ship, a merchant vessel, large, heavily laden. He heard the men whispering about chests, about treasures, about the end of all misery. But something gnawed at his stomach. He saw the sails of the strange ship—old, slack, the planks dark. And he felt: The sea is already laughing.

The "Bunte Kuh" shot forward, the cannons fired, the men shouted. It was as if the gold was already in their pockets, the crowns were already around their necks, the women were already under their thighs.

And the sea roared, like an old man amused by fools.

The "Bunte Kuh" thundered toward us, the cannons roared, black smoke settled over the waves. The merchant ship shuddered, wood splintered, sails tore, men screamed. The pirates roared back as if the heavens themselves were witnessing them.

Klaus was the first to jump over, his saber raised, a wild laugh on his lips. "Come on, you dogs! Everything belongs to us!" The first Hanseatic man fell before he could raise his musket. Blood spurted, mingling with salt water, and the crew raged like a pack of wolves that finally smelled meat.

The boy stumbled after them, his heart racing, his hands clasped around his knife. He saw men dying, saw eyes filled with fear, saw the deck planks turning red. The screaming, the groaning, the splintering—it was a single chorus of hell, and in the middle of it all was Klaus, louder, bigger, unstoppable.

The Hanseatics fought back, but they were traders, not warriors. Within minutes, they were lying on the ground, some dead, some kneeling with their hands raised. The pirates laughed, punched, kicked, pulled out crates, tugged at barrels, and screamed in ecstasy.

"Gold!" someone yelled as they broke open the first chest. The lid sprang open, and for a moment, everyone thought the glint of sunlight inside was pure

metal. They pounced on it like children on sugar, their hands greedily, their eyes wide.

The one-eyed man stayed in the background, wiping blood from his knife and grinning coldly. He knew: The moment of jubilation is the best knife. The greater the joy, the deeper the fall.

The boy stood trembling next to an open chest. He saw what was inside—and his heart froze. No gold, no silver. Only stones, encrusted with salt, wrapped in cloth to make them appear heavier. Ballast. Deception.

The men hadn't noticed yet. They laughed, they screamed, they cheered. But he knew: Any moment, the sea would strike back. Any moment, the laughter would turn into anger.

And the “Colorful Cow” groaned in the distance, as if it knew: It is not a treasure, only a curse.

The initial laughter was stifled when one of the men held up a handful of the supposed "coins." They didn't clink. They didn't shine. They were stones, round, heavy, encrusted with salt. One of them dropped them, and they thudded dully onto the deck, like stillborn children.

"What the hell...?" one muttered. "That's not gold!" another yelled, and immediately the deck was a chaos of curses. Men ripped open more crates, banging on wood with knives, axes, and their bare fists. But everywhere the same thing: stones, ballast, sometimes a few rusty nails or rotten cloths.

The euphoria turned into rage. Knives flashed, fists flew, men screamed like animals cheated out of their food. One kicked one of the captured traders in the face until teeth flew, another hacked at a chest with his saber as if he could carve out gold if he just struck deep enough.

Klaus roared, standing on the railing, his chest puffed out, his voice loud as thunder. "Calm down, you dogs! Calm down! We have the ship, we have the timber, we have the cargo! Treasure is what we make of it!"

But his grin was forced, everyone could see that. He had promised, and the loot was nothing.

Then the one-eyed man stepped forward, his face dark, his voice like a knife in the silence. "Do you hear him? First he shouts about gold, now he's selling us stones as wealth. Is he a captain? Or a fool?"

The crew grumbled, nodded, their gazes growing sharper and harder. One threw stones at his feet, sending them clattering across the planks. "We want gold, Klaus, not rubble!"

The boy stood at the edge, his heart racing. He felt the hatred growing, how it distorted the men's faces. And he knew: the stones weren't the worst thing. The worst thing was that Klaus's word carried no more weight than this rubble.

The “Colorful Cow” swayed slightly as if she were laughing—a bitter, deep laugh at fools who see gold in every shadow and never realize that the shadow itself is devouring them.

The first trader screamed as a knife stabbed him in the stomach. It wasn't a planned murder, but an outburst—raw rage, blind disappointment. But as soon as the blood flowed, the crew bellowed like a herd of animals that had smelled the scent of meat.

They pounced on the prisoners, hitting, kicking, tearing. Bones cracked, screams rang out, hands begged. But the pirates showed no mercy, not in this hour when their dream of gold crumbled to dust. Every blow, every stab was not only against the traders, but against the feeling of having been betrayed—by the world, by the sea, by the captain.

Klaus roared, swung his saber, trying to control his fury. "Stop! Stop, damn it! We're not slaughter dogs!" But no one heard. His voice was lost in the screeching, the splintering, the thunder of boots and blades.

The one-eyed man stood at the mast, silent, arms crossed. He grinned as the blood flowed. He didn't have to say anything. The chaos spoke for him. Every dead merchant was another nail in Klaus's coffin.

The boy stood rooted to the spot, knife in hand, but unable to move. He saw an old merchant kneel, his hands clasped, tears streaming down his cheeks—and then a blow came from behind, nearly splitting him in two. Blood spurted across the deck, over the boy's shoes. He tasted iron on his tongue.

When the last voice had fallen silent, the merchant ship lay still. The planks were red, the stench of blood mingled with the sweet smell that had been carried by the wind for days. And suddenly everyone understood: The smell wasn't coming from the sea. It was coming from here.

Klaus stood breathless, his sword dripping. He looked at the men gasping over the corpses, and he knew: They hadn't won. They had lost, more than any gold would have been worth.

The “Bunte Kuh” swayed beside the dead ship as if turning away, ashamed of what her men had done.

After the screams died down, the men crawled through the ship like madmen. They tore open planks, broke down doors, and pulled out every crate, as if they might find a miracle somewhere.

But everywhere it was the same: barrels full of fermented beer that stank of vinegar. Crates of rotten cloths, eaten through by mold. Tools, rusty and dull. Salt sacks, damp and clumped, no longer even fit for sale. And more ballast stones, tons of ballast.

"That can't be all!" one shouted, slashing at an empty chest with an axe until the handle broke. "There must be something!" Others desperately ripped open even more, pulling out even rotten ropes that crumbled at the first touch.

Their faces twisted. The euphoria of an hour ago was gone, burned like dry wood. All that remained was anger. Anger at the traders who lay dead at their feet. Anger at the sea that gave them nothing. Anger at Klaus, who had fanned the flames of greed with his big talk of gold and wealth.

Klaus himself stood in the bow, breathing heavily, wiping blood from his beard. "We'll take what we can get," he shouted, but his voice sounded weak, like an old dog that still growls but has lost its teeth. "Wood, salt, barrels, ropes. Anything that will hold weight. We'll throw it on the cow, and then we'll find a ship that's more valuable!"

But no one cheered. A few men nodded, most just growled. One spat on the ground, right at Klaus's feet.

The one-eyed man pushed his way between them, his face as innocent as a priest—but his voice dripping with venom. "Do you hear that, men? We bleed, we kill, we eat corpses—and in the end, there's stones and mold. A captain who leads us like that leads us to starvation."

The words sank deeper than any knife. Some men murmured their assent, others just stared at Klaus.

The boy saw everything, saw the loot that wasn't loot, the men who already looked like dead dogs, saw Klaus, who remained silent, and the one-eyed man, who grinned. And he felt: No one had won here. Not the sea, not the traders, not the pirates.

Only death. He had eaten his fill.

And the “Colorful Cow” lay heavy in the water, as if it wanted to sink – not from the weight, but from shame.

The "Bunte Kuh" broke away from the merchant ship, ponderously, laden with nothing. Men tugged wearily at the ropes, their faces hollow, their eyes empty. No song sounded, no victory celebration. Only creaking, groaning, the wind beating against the sails.

Behind them, the dead ship drifted, slowly sinking, the merchants' bodies still on deck like dolls no one bothered to pick up. Seagulls swooped down on it, screeching, pecking, tearing, and fluttering. Every cry of the birds was like a mocking song that echoed in the pirates' minds.

Klaus stood at the wheel, his face hard, his hands firm, but his eyes searching into the void. He mumbled something about "next catch," "next luck," but it sounded like a prayer no one wanted to hear.

The crew was silent. One stuffed moldy bread into his mouth, chewing slowly, as if trying to crush his anger with each bite. Another stared at the ballast stones now stacked in the cabin, as if he were about to laugh or cry—he did neither. Another sharpened his knife, not for prey, but for something else.

The one-eyed man smiled quietly. He didn't speak a word, didn't need to. Every breath was a reproach to Klaus, every look from the men a silent dagger. He knew the treasure wasn't real—but the poison he needed was now embedded deep in his flesh.

The boy sat at the bow, his knees drawn up, his hands in his hair. He could still smell the blood, the sweat, the stones. He understood: The sea had tricked them, yes—but it wasn't the sea. It was their own greed. They had created the treasure themselves, in their minds, with their dreams. And when it wasn't there, they were emptier than before.

The sun set, red as fresh blood. The "Bunte Kuh" sailed on, slowly, heavily, and the sea laughed silently.

Because the worst treasure was the one you found – and realized that it was nothing.

Curses, fists, shackles

It began quietly, as always. A murmur in the morning, a curse in the half-light. One spat at Klaus's feet, another raised his eyebrows and growled: "A captain who sells us stones isn't even fit to be a dog driver."

Klaus heard it. He heard everything. He laughed sharply, rum running down his beard. "Stones? You want gold? Go to hell for it! Or do you think the damn wind carries coins on the planks?" His voice whipped like a rope, but no one laughed with him.

Then it exploded. One of the men grabbed the other by the collar for nodding too loudly. "Shut up, or you'll be the next to fall!" A fist to the face, blood spurting. A third intervened, knives flashed, and within seconds the deck was a cauldron of commotion.

Klaus jumped in, struck out, and threw a guy over the planks, barely avoiding falling into the sea. "Stop it, you bastards!" he yelled. But his words were weaker than his fists.

The one-eyed man stood at the railing, grinning as he watched the fight. He didn't shout, he didn't hit. He knew: sometimes you just have to watch, and the men tear each other apart on their own.

In the end, they pulled one of the men, bloody and with a broken nose, up to the mast. They wrapped ropes around him, tied him up, and laughed mockingly. "There he hangs, the false dog! Let him rot like Hinnerk!" Mocking songs were sung, not cheerful, but like blows, venomous, full of hate.

The boy stood still, his hands sweating, his throat dry. He saw the men treating their own comrade like a prisoner. He saw Klaus raging, but finding only

mockery in their faces. And he knew: This was no longer a ship. This was a floating dungeon.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked as if it were writhing under the weight.

The next day, at first light, the air was charged, like before a thunderstorm. The men had barely slept, and the murmuring never stopped. Every sentence was an accusation, every laugh a mockery. And then one wrong look was enough.

Two men lunged at each other, their fists pounding until blood spurted. A third jumped in, a fourth, and within minutes the deck was no longer a ship, but a drunken tavern—only without a barman to stop the barrels.

Klaus saw it, spat, threw down the rum jug, and jumped right into the middle. No words, just punches. His fist slammed into the jaw of a man, who staggered and spat his teeth onto the wood. Another came from behind – Klaus yanked him by the neck, slamming him against the mast, so that he collapsed like a sack.

"I'm your damned captain!" he roared, his face red, his beard dripping with sweat. "Anyone who thinks otherwise will eat my iron!" He snatched his saber and held it high, sunlight flickering on the blade. For a moment, the men retreated, chests heaving, hands bloody.

But it wasn't a victory. It was merely a reprieve. Their eyes were wild, their fingers trembled, as if they wanted to see more blood—whether from the Hanseatic League, the merchants, or their own people.

The one-eyed man saw it all and said nothing. He just grinned and tilted his head slightly, as if listening for the thunder that was yet to come.

The boy stood by the railing, his heart pounding. He was afraid—not of Klaus, not of the men. But of what they had become together: a horde that didn't need an enemy to tear itself apart.

And the “Colorful Cow” swayed heavily, as if she herself had trouble carrying this anger.

They were tired of wrestling—not because their anger had died down, but because the planks were already covered in blood and teeth. Instead, they found a new game: bondage.

The first one was still hanging from the mast, his face swollen, his lips chapped. Now they dragged two more men over—one had mocked Klaus too loudly during the argument, the other had listened to the one-eyed man for too long. Ropes were hauled in, hands twisted behind their backs, and they tied them up like pigs being taken to market.

"There they hang," one man cried scornfully, "three dogs on the mast, three less curses on deck!" Laughter erupted, sharp, nasty, without joy. Everyone who tied the ropes did so with too much zeal, as if drowning their own doubts in the rope.

Klaus stood at the helm, his eyes red, his beard dripping with rum and anger. "You're making yourselves into jailers!" he yelled. "We're pirates, not jailers!" But no one listened. The men continued to laugh, tightening their ties, occasionally punching the bound men in the ribs with their fists, just to hear the growling.

The one-eyed man walked slowly past the mast, looked at the bound men, and spoke so quietly that only they could hear: "You are not the first. Soon your captain will be hanging beside you." One eye gleamed, cold as steel. The bound men stared at him, and the seed was sown.

The boy watched everything, his heart heavy. He realized: It was no longer about loot, not about gold, not about the sea. It was only about power. Every man wanted someone to blame, and they tied him up to feel strong. But the true shackles weren't around the arms of these three—they were around everyone, invisible, knotted with mistrust and hatred.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned, the ropes creaked as if she herself could feel the ropes.

The three on the mast began to scream. First wildly, threateningly, like dogs tearing at their chains. Then pleadingly, gasping, like men who realize no one wants to free them. "Free us! You fools! We are brothers!" one howled, his voice rising. Another spat blood and shrieked: "Captain! Do you want to let us rot?"

Klaus roared back, but his voice sounded brittle, hollow like an old drum. "You mocked, you cursed! Now eat the ropes until you learn who to obey!" He wanted to sound like thunder, but it was just a distant rumble that no one took seriously.

The crew stood around the mast, laughing, hurling words like daggers. "There they hang, the traitors!" - "Let them squirm until the wind eats them!" One took a piece of spoiled bread and pressed it between the bound man's teeth, only to hear him choke. Laughter echoed across the deck, sharp, without joy.

The one-eyed man stepped forward, raised his hand as if demanding calm, and then spoke in a cold voice: "Look at them. Today, three hang. Tomorrow, there could be six. And who decides who hangs? A captain who doesn't even find gold." His words seeped into the men, deeper than salt into the wood.

The bound men screamed louder, raged, spat, and swore revenge. But their voices were lost against the sea, which roared impassively, as if it had already heard thousands of such screams.

The boy stood aside, his knees weak, his head heavy. He saw how the men made enemies of his own brothers, how the shackles constricted not only their bodies but their hearts. And he knew: They were no longer a crew. They were a court, a mob, each ready to nail the next to the cross.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned in the wind as if it itself were hanging on a rope.

The creaking was quiet at first – then the rope snapped. One of the bound men had writhed with raw desperation until the ropes gave way. Suddenly he stood there, half-free, his arms still sore, but his eyes wild as an animal. He roared, lunged at the next man, pulled him to the ground, and bit his ear like a rabid dog. Blood spurted, screams erupted.

The next moment, the entire deck was a mill of fists, blades, and curses. Men rushed at each other, some trying to retie the escaped man, others trying to free him, still others taking advantage of the chaos to settle their own scores. Knives flashed, a rope's end swung like a club, wood splintered, and the smell of sweat and blood hung heavy in the air.

Klaus roared, his saber raised, but no one heard him anymore. His words were just a drop in the ocean. "Stop! Stop, damn it!" But his voice was drowned out by the thunder of blows.

Then Bone Man came. Wordless, as always. He stomped through the crowd, grabbed the unleashed pirate by the neck with one hand as if he were a boy, and hurled him back against the mast. With his other fist, he knocked down two men who were trying to strangle each other. He was no voice, no word—he was a wall of muscle, a fist of iron that crushed everything.

Silence only fell when three men lay unconscious on the ground and Bone Man stood in the middle of the deck, his chest heaving, his eyes dark as the sea at night. He didn't speak, he didn't have to. Everyone knew: One more step, and his fist would strike next.

The bound men groaned, the men panted, blood dripped onto the planks. But no one moved.

The boy stood at the railing, his hands shaking. He looked at Bone Man and realized: As long as this block stood, the ship would still hold together—not through Klaus, not through gold, not through words. Only through brute force.

The “Colorful Cow” swayed as if it had been hit itself.

After Bone Man's Fist, the ship was so silent that the creaking of the wood could be heard, like the breathing of an old animal. The men stood there, their lips bloody, their eyes empty, and no one dared to raise their head.

The bound men groaned on the mast, their faces swollen, their skin torn by the rope. One wheezed, another cursed softly, a third wept, tears mingling with blood. But no one untied them. Not out of pity, not out of camaraderie. They were memorials—ropes of flesh that showed what awaited anyone who dared to utter the wrong word.

Klaus stood at the helm, sword still in his hand, but he seemed smaller than ever. His voice was gone, shattered like the teeth in the men's mouths. He drank, coughed, and spat overboard. Everyone knew: He was still the captain, but only because no one was strong enough to take it away from him. Not yet.

The one-eyed man strolled slowly through the silence, his hands behind his back, as if he were a priest on his way to the altar. He nodded, smiled, whispered a word here and there, barely audibly. He continued to sow, invisibly, incessantly. Every glance he cast was a dagger he hadn't yet drawn.

The boy stood with his back against the railing, his eyes on the shackles. It dawned on him: There was no freedom here. Not on this ship. Everyone was bound—by ropes, by fists, by fear. They called themselves privateers, masters of the sea, but they were nothing but prisoners, each one the other's guard.

The “Bunte Kuh” rocked heavily over the waves as if it carried no gold, no loot, but only ballast – ballast of hatred, mistrust and ropes.

And the wind whispered softly, as if giggling: Soon you will tear yourselves apart.

The Night the Moon Vomited

Night fell silently, too silently. No wind, no rustling, only the faint creaking of the planks. Even the waves seemed to be holding their breath. The men lay in their hammocks, turning, whispering, as if afraid to disturb the silence itself.

Then someone stepped onto the deck, looked up, and his scream roused everyone from their sleep. "By all the devils... just look!"

The sky was sickly. The moon hung low, larger than usual, but its light wasn't silver. It was yellowish, greenish, like rotten fat on a broth. And it was dripping—not really, but it looked as if it were spitting. The light sloshed, running in veils over the clouds, as if the moon itself had a stomach full of blood and bile.

"The moon is puking," the man whispered. His voice was shaky, but the word flew through the ship like a dagger. "The moon is puking... on us."

Immediately, the deck was full. Men crowded around, staring up, and everyone saw it: the sky was choking, the moon was spitting, and the light settled on the sails, on the skin, on the planks like slime.

Klaus arrived last, his saber at his belt, his jug still in his hand. He looked up, spat on the planks, and yelled: "A moon that vomits? Screw it! Maybe it's only spitting on you cowards! Anyone afraid of light might as well jump overboard!" He laughed, loudly, hard—but the laughter stopped in mid-sentence because even he couldn't talk the putrid glow away.

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, raised his hand, and pointed at Klaus. "Do you see? The sky is spitting because it's sick of him. The moon is vomiting because our captain stinks." A murmur went through the men, and their eyes darted.

The boy stood at the bow, the light chilling his face. He felt that it didn't matter whether the moon actually vomited or not. What mattered was that they believed it. And faith on a ship was stronger than any iron.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked deeply, as if it were choking itself.

No sooner had the first whispered than it erupted. Men muttered prayers, old and false, tinged with curses. Some knelt on the planks, kissing the wood as if the "Colorful Cow" could save them. Others ripped open their shirts, beat their chests, and cried out for forgiveness, though they didn't know from whom.

One shouted: "A sacrifice! The sea demands a sacrifice, or the moon will eat us with its vomit!" Immediately, two men grabbed the bound man by the mast and dragged him forward as if they were about to throw him overboard.

"Stop!" Klaus roared, leaping forward, sword raised. "No one will be sacrificed! Not a damned man! We are pirates, not scavengers!" But his voice died away in the chaos. The men screamed louder, spewing words like poison: "The moon vomits because you're leading us!" "It wants you, Klaus, not us!" "Sacrifice it, and the heavens will be silent!"

The moonlight flickered, drawing green streaks across their faces. Each looked like a corpse already half buried.

The one-eyed man stepped out of the shadows, raising his voice, clear, ice-cold: "Who will lead us so that even the heavens surrender? Who promised gold and brought stones? Who laughed when the wind smelled of corpses?" He pointed at Klaus, his eye sparkling. "Perhaps the moon doesn't want us. Perhaps it only wants him."

A murmur went through the men, louder, more dangerous. Some nodded, others clenched their fists, still others grabbed the ends of the rope.

The boy stood trembling, his fingers clammy. He knew that if they took one more step, they would feed their captain to the sea—not out of courage, not out of justice, but out of sheer fear.

And above it all hung the moon, vomiting, lurking, a sick eye that saw everything.

Klaus stomped onto the deck, sword raised, his face a mask of rage. "You dogs! You pray to a vomiting light while I'm your captain? I'm the one who feeds you, who keeps you alive! Not the damn moon!"

He swung the blade through the air, the rotten glow slithering across the steel like slime. "Which of you dares to make me a victim? Whoever wants to stand against me should do so now!"

But the men no longer saw him as a captain. The moon cast greenish shadows on his face, making him look like a man who was already rotting. One whispered, "He looks like a dead man..." And suddenly it was no longer a whisper, but a chorus: "Dead... dead... dead..."

Then someone stepped forward. A burly pirate, his face pale, his eyes wide. He was trembling, but he held a knife, and his voice was shrill: "The moon wants you, Klaus! Not us!" He rushed forward, knife drawn, and screamed like a man who had already sacrificed himself.

Klaus struck. A single blow that broke the knife-arm like a piece of wood. The pirate fell, screaming, blood spurting. Klaus placed his foot on his chest, holding the sword high, the veins in his neck swelling. "There! There you see who lives and who dies! I am your damned king, and anyone who contradicts me will eat iron!"

But the men didn't flinch. They saw the wounded man whimpering. They saw Klaus, trembling, in the green, vomitous light of the moon. And instead of awe, even more hatred filled their eyes.

The boy stood aside, his heart pounding. He realized: Klaus had won—and yet lost. Because fighting the moon isn't fighting men. And that's a battle no captain can win.

Above them the sky continued to choke.

The deck boiled. Some men screamed for blood, others prayed, others laughed like madmen. The wounded man whimpered on the ground, the knife still in his hand, but useless. The moonlight ran green across the wood, as if the planks themselves had begun to rot.

Then the one-eyed man stepped forward, slowly, deliberately, as if he didn't want to calm the chaos, but rather give it direction. He raised his arms, his voice clear as steel:

"Do you see it, you dogs? The sky itself spits on him. The moon vomits because our captain insulted him. Who else? Who mocked the wind when it stank of corpses? Who sold us stones as gold? Who laughs at signs that even gods take seriously?"

He pointed at Klaus. One eye glittered in the light, sharp as a dagger. "It's not the sea that hates us. It's him. He bears the curse. As long as he breathes, the sky will continue to vomit."

A murmur rolled over the crew. Some nodded, some drew knives, others clung to ropes as if clinging to the last vestiges of sanity. "He's cursed..." one murmured. "If we sacrifice him, the heavens will fall silent..."

Klaus roared, striking the mast with his sword, sending sparks flying. "I am not a victim! I am the storm, the king, the last man keeping you alive!" But his words echoed empty, and his face in the green light looked more like a mask of corpse skin.

The boy stood as if petrified. He saw how the one-eyed man's word weighed more heavily than any fist, how men no longer saw the world with their eyes, but with superstition.

And the moon hung above them like a dripping head that kept vomiting.

It began with a single man who gathered courage. He ripped a rope from the hook and wrapped it in his hands, his eyes flickering like candles in a storm. "Tie him up!" he roared, "sacrifice him, and then the heavens will fall silent!"

Two jumped in immediately, then three, and suddenly there was a chorus: "Tie up the captain! Tie up the curse!"

Klaus laughed, a sick, hoarse laugh. "You want to tie me up? Me? Come here, you dogs!" He charged forward, sword raised, and the first man holding the rope lost half his hand as he ran—hewn off with a single blow. Screams, blood, fingers leaping like dice across the planks.

But the men didn't stop. They screamed louder, throwing themselves at Klaus like a pack trying to bring down a wild animal. Rope wrapped itself around his arm, he yanked, punched, kicked, and pushed one back over the railing—a muffled scream, then nothing but water. Another clung to his leg until Klaus crushed his skull with the butt of his knife.

It was a grinding machine. Men and ropes against a captain who didn't want to die. Blood spurted, wood splintered, the sails flapped like drums in the wind.

And then Bone Man came. He stood at the edge of the chaos, arms crossed, face like stone. For a moment, it seemed as if he were doing nothing, as if he were leaving Klaus to the judgment of the crew.

But then he stepped into the fray. With his bare hands, he slashed men apart, ripped ropes from Klaus's body, and kicked a pirate in the chest so hard that he

crashed backward through a barrel. Not a word, just fists as big as anchors that brought down anyone who came near Klaus.

Silence didn't come immediately, but the screams diminished until only the panting remained. Men lay on the ground, bloody, groaning, ropes loose in their hands.

Klaus stood panting, his sword dripping, his gaze wild. Beside him stood Bone Man, silent, like a gallows pole made of flesh.

The men stared. They didn't dare take another step. Not against these two. Not tonight.

The boy saw it and knew: Klaus was saved—not by his crown, not by his word, but by Bone Man's fist. But it wasn't a rescue. It was only a reprieve.

And the moon continued to vomit all over the ship as if it had nothing else to do.

The deck smelled of iron, sweat, and knitting fibers. Men lay scattered, groaning, with broken noses, split lips, and bloody hands. The moon still hung above them, its sickly light running over planks and faces as if it were spitting on everyone equally.

Klaus stood at the helm with his legs spread, sword still in his hand. He grinned, but it was a grin that bore more pain than pride. His breath was labored, his eyes red as hot coals. He didn't seem like a king—more like an animal that had been beaten too often and now lived only by defiance.

Bone Man stood beside him, motionless, his fists still red. He said nothing, he didn't need to say anything. His presence alone was a judgment:*You don't dare.*

The crew, however, remained silent, even if they didn't speak. Their eyes spoke. Hatred, bright and burning, lay in them. Hatred for Klaus, hatred for the gallows of flesh that protected him. Hatred for themselves for failing to throw him into the sea. Every look was an unspoken promise:*Next time.*

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, and although he too looked defeated, his shirt torn, his eyes dark as night, he smiled. He knew that no fist, no sword, no bone man could tear the seeds from the heads he had sown.

The boy crouched at the bow, his head in his hands. He felt that this night had changed them all. They hadn't just fought against themselves—they had fought against the sky, against the moon. And no one could win.

The "Bunte Kuh" swayed lazily in the swell, as if she herself were exhausted from all the blood and screaming. But there was something restless in her creaking, as if she knew: The rope is still hanging. And it's waiting.

High in the sky hung the moon, pale and tired after its vomiting. And yet it seemed to grin.

One barrel too many, one friend too few

The evening began like a celebration. Someone pulled the new barrel out of the cabin, smashed the lid with an axe, and the smell of rum spread like incense in a cursed church. Men shrieked, laughed, and screamed as if they had struck gold.

Cups were filled, hands grabbed greedily, tongues licked the rim before their lips even reached it. Within minutes, the "Bunte Kuh" was singing again. No songs of freedom or glory—just dirty songs about whores, gallows, and sweat. Words that flew through the air like fists, accompanied by laughter that was too loud, too harsh.

Klaus sat in the middle, his legs spread, his beard dripping with rum. He shouted the loudest, laughed the deepest, and slammed his cup on the table, sending shards flying. "See, you dogs? The sea may hate us, the moon may vomit—but rum remains loyal to us!" The men roared, clinking glasses as if he were king again.

The boy sat in the shade, sipping cautiously as the noise grew. He saw the men's eyes gleam, their words grow sharper, even in their laughter. Rum was no friend—it was a knife that started blunt and ended sharp.

The one-eyed man sat apart, drank less, grinned more. He let the others roar, let them sing, let them sweat. His voice was barely audible, but his whisper traveled from ear to ear, like a rat chewing through wood.

The "Bunte Kuh" swayed, the wood trembling with the pounding of feet, the clinking of cups, and the screams of people. For a moment, it sounded like a floating whorehouse, full of life, full of fire.

But there was something sharp about it all. A crackling, like the air before a flash of lightning. The boy felt it in his stomach: This barrel was too much.

The laughter was loud at first, then shrill, then biting. Words that had been mockery turned into accusations. One man laughed at another for cowering behind the mast during the last boarding. "Cowardly dog!" he roared, and the men roared. But the man being spat upon reached for the cup and tipped it not down his throat, but into the mocker's face. Rum ran over his eyes and beard, the laughter was stifled—and the first fist crashed.

Cups became weapons, tables became shields. Men threw themselves at each other, laughing even as they fought, as if they couldn't decide whether they were brothers or murderers. "You still owe me my share of the last catch!" one screamed, bashing the other with a splinter of wood. Another shouted, "You fucked my whore in Hamburg!" – and suddenly it wasn't booze anymore, it was war.

Klaus jumped onto the table, the cup still in his hand, and laughed hoarsely. "That's how I want to see you! Men who live! Men who drink and bleed!" He swung the cup as if it were a crown and downed it in one gulp. His teeth flashed in the lamplight, but even in his laughter there was something hollow, like an echo no one wanted to hear.

The one-eyed man sat against the wall, grinning. He didn't have to do anything—the barrel did the work for him. Every insult was a paving stone he had laid long ago. Now the men walked the path alone, straight into the ravine.

The boy crouched in the corner, his eyes wide. He saw the fists, the blood, the tears that no one saw because they were drowning in rum. And he sensed: One of them wouldn't get up tonight. Not because the moon was vomiting or the sea was cursing them—but because the barrel was too full.

The "Colorful Cow" swayed beneath their feet, not from the wind, but from the men's roar. And in its creaking, it sounded as if it were sighing:*One less.*

The fight boiled over like a barrel with no lid. Fists were no longer enough. One man grabbed a knife. The clang as the blade emerged from its sheath cut

through the noise like thunder. Everyone heard it, and everyone knew: From now on, there's no more fun.

The man with the blade lunged forward, his eyes glazed over with rum and rage. He didn't stab blindly, he stabbed with purpose—right into the belly of one who had just been roaring his drinking song with him. A gasp, then blood, warm and black, spurted onto the table.

Silence. For just a heartbeat. Then screams, a chorus of panic and fury. Some jumped apart, others lunged at the knifeman, still others grabbed their own blades as if defending themselves.

The wounded man staggered, clutching his stomach, blood trickling between his fingers. His face was contorted, but there was more pain than anger in his eyes. He looked at his attacker, his friend, his drunken brother, and gasped: "Why...?" Then he fell, dully, heavy, like a sack of grain, and didn't move again.

Klaus roared, his voice hoarse: "Stop it, you dogs! Do you want to exterminate yourselves here?" But no one listened. The men screamed, fists continued to fly, and the knife still flashed, wet with blood.

The one-eyed man grinned coldly. "One barrel too many..." he murmured, barely audibly, "...and one less." He knew he didn't have to do anything else. The ship would take care of itself.

The boy stood trembling in the corner, looking at the corpse on the planks, the blood seeping into the cracks as if the ship itself were drinking. It dawned on him: here, no one died at the hands of enemies; here, they died at the hands of themselves.

The "Colorful Cow" creaked softly, almost pityingly. But it also sounded like laughter, deep within the wood.

As soon as the dead man lay still, the screaming began. "He killed him!" - "No, he provoked him!" - "The captain allowed it!" Everyone pointed at each other, everyone yelled louder, as if they could scream themselves invisible if they just stuffed enough guilt down the others' throats.

The knifeman was still standing there, his face white, his hand shaking. He stared at the blade as if he himself hadn't believed he would use it. "He... he insulted me," he stammered. "He... he..." His voice trailed off. No one heard him.

Two men leaped forward, grabbed him, and ripped the knife from his hand. One punched him so hard in the face that he crashed to the ground. "Whoever slaughters a brother is no longer a brother!" They shouted, spat, and the crowd cheered as if the next corpse was about to follow.

Klaus stomped through the chaos, his face contorted, his beard dripping with rum and sweat. He roared, but this time without a sword, only with his fists. His knuckles slammed into faces, into stomachs, into teeth. "Stop! You're not children, you're men! Pirates, damn you!" He slashed left, he slashed right, until the voices grew fainter, until the screams were mere groans.

The deck shook as he grabbed the knifeman and yanked him up, blood dripping from his nose. "He'll live!" Klaus yelled. "His blood has paid enough!" He threw him against a barrel, where he lay, semi-conscious.

The men stared, breathing heavily, their eyes full of hatred, full of fear, full of thirst for more. But they didn't move. Not now.

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, and his grin had widened. He didn't have to draw a knife. The men did the work for him. Klaus had stopped them, yes—but not as a captain. Only as a bruiser, as the strongest dog in the pack.

The boy saw the captain's shaking fist, saw the blood on the deck, the corpse already growing cold. And he knew: Rum had once again made a friend. And the next one was already waiting.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked, heavy and dark, as if it wanted to say:*One barrel, one dead. Many barrels left.*

In the morning, the corpse still lay there, stiff, its face ripped open with the last cry. No one wanted to touch him. They walked around him, drinking, spitting, cursing—but no one moved. As if the wood itself were holding him, as if he were now part of the "Colorful Cow."

Finally, two men grabbed him, silently, without prayer, without song. They wrapped him in a piece of canvas and roughly knotted it. No iron, no weight—they just wanted him gone. Two steps, a jerk, and he splashed into the sea. No words, no goodbye. Just a dull bubbling, then he was gone.

The men returned, sat down, and picked up their cups again. But the rum tasted different. Bitter. Sharper. They drank deeper, as if trying to mask the taste of blood. But it remained.

Klaus sat with his legs wide apart, his eyes red, his voice ragged. "One more dead... and yet we're still here." He raised his cup, drained it, and slammed it down on the plank. "That's life, you dogs!" He laughed, but his laughter echoed empty, and no one joined in.

The one-eyed man looked around, slowly, warily. "One barrel cost us a friend," he finally said quietly, but loud enough for everyone to hear. "Wonder what the next barrel will take." A murmur went through the men, and everyone's gaze wandered to Klaus—as if he were the barrel itself, turning every sip into poison.

The boy sat in the shadow, his eyes fixed on the sea where the dead man had sunk. He knew the sea wouldn't take him. The sea only laughed. It let the men do the work themselves, one by one.

The “Colorful Cow” swayed lazily, as if it were still carrying the dead man.

Night crept across the deck again, but this time without songs. No shouting, no thigh-slapping. Just gulping. The gurgling of the rum was louder than any voice. Everyone drank as if they were alone, their eyes empty, their hands clenched.

The seats that had once been filled by brothers next to each other were now empty. Where the dead man had sat, the jug still stood, half-full; no one touched it. Everyone knew: if anyone drank, the ghost would be at the table with him. And that was one drinker too many.

Klaus tried again, climbing onto the table, his chest broad, his grin crooked. "We've lost one—but we're still the kings of the sea! Let the Hanseatic League tremble, let the gallows wait! As long as rum flows, Störtebeker lives!"

His voice echoed across the deck. But there was no answer. Only an occasional cough, a swallow, a scratching of a cup. Klaus continued to grin, but the grin was hollow, like an empty skull. He stepped up from the table, sat down, and drank like the others—alone, among them.

The one-eyed man remained silent, his grin hidden in shadow. He knew words were now superfluous. The rift had opened. One friend less, one emptiness more. And emptiness consumes men faster than hunger.

The boy felt it more deeply than anyone else. Today, more than one man had died. Today, the illusion that brothers sat here had died. They were no longer a team, no longer a family, no longer a bond. They were just men in ropes, each for themselves, each ready to stab the other at the next cup.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned in the darkness, heavy, tired, and its creaking sounded like the swallowing of a drowning man.

And somewhere out there the sea was laughing.

The sea never forgets

The morning was gray, the sea smooth as cold iron. The men stood silently at the railing, their eyes red from the rum and the night. No song, no scream, only the creaking of the "Bunte Kuh."

Then it came swimming up. First a dark spot in the distance, then more clearly. A piece of wood, shredded, torn by the salt, the water foaming around it. The men leaned forward, breathing heavily.

"That's... from the merchant ship," someone murmured. And everyone knew he was right. The notches, the pattern—it was unmistakable. It was a splinter from the wreck they had plundered. From the ship whose men they had slaughtered until the planks were red.

More came. Crates, empty and swollen, a barrel without a lid, a shoe dancing among the waves like a lost animal. And then, in the middle of it all, a corpse. Bloated, its face squashed, its eyes gouged out by fish. It drifted slowly, turning, and for a moment it seemed to be staring back at the ship.

The men stepped back, cursing, some crossing themselves, others spitting over the railing as if they could drown the sight. One whispered, "The sea wants to remind us..."

Klaus laughed loudly, too loudly. "Remember? Shit! The sea has eaten more dead people than we can count. A few planks, a few carcasses—what does it matter?" He raised his cup and drank, the rum running down his beard. "The sea eats and forgets. Otherwise, it would have been full to the brim by now!"

But the men didn't laugh. They saw the corpse floating slowly past the ship, its mouth open as if it were about to choke out one last word.

The one-eyed man stepped forward, his voice quiet and clear. "The sea never forgets. It brings back what we give it. Perhaps one day it will bring us back too..."

The men grumbled, their eyes dark. The water gurgled, the flotsam sloshed against the hull, dull, like a heartbeat.

The boy stood still, his hands clammy. He sensed this was no coincidence. The sea was not a mirror, the sea was a memory. And now it began to read to them.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned to the rhythm of the waves, as if it were on the list itself.

Things got worse in the afternoon. The sun didn't really shine through, just hung like a glowing patch behind gray clouds. And the water kept carrying more and more. First two more boards, then a torn sail, then an entire door, slowly bobbing up and down in the swell like a tombstone that wouldn't sink.

And then the corpses. Several of them. Bloated, corroded, but unmistakably human. One was floating on his stomach, his back covered in welts, as if he had been beaten in death. Another still had his hands tied together, the ropes fluttering in the water like drowned snakes.

The men stood at the railing, no one laughing, no one spitting. One knelt, pounding his forehead on the wood, muttering confused prayers. Another whispered, "It's the ones we killed... they'll find us again." A third shouted, "Do you hear it? They're knocking!" – and indeed, the flotsam thudded dully against the "Bunte Kuh," a rhythm like a heart that refused to die.

Klaus stormed forward, his eyes red, his voice loud as thunder. "Stop it, you fools! They're just fish, just water, just shit! The sea gives, the sea takes, and now it's washing a few carcasses in front of us—so what?" He raised the cup, emptied it in one gulp, and shouted into the water: "Here! Eat my rum, eat my laughter, eat me if you can! But I'll forget you, you stinking mess!"

The men stepped back, staring at him as if he had just insulted the devil himself. The water gurgled, the corpses continued to float, spinning, and one actually seemed to be smiling, his teeth bared.

The one-eyed man quietly stepped beside Klaus, one eye cold. "One doesn't laugh at a sea that speaks," he said, just loud enough for the men to hear. "One doesn't laugh when the dead come back."

A murmur went through the crew. Some lowered their gaze, others stared at Klaus with open, hateful eyes.

The boy held his breath. He knew: The captain could fight against men, against ropes, against the gallows. But against the sea? Even his roar was just a whisper.

The “Colorful Cow” rocked heavily as if trying to avoid the corpses, but the water pushed it ever closer.

Towards evening, the sky darkened. Clouds piled up, heavy as iron plates, and the wind shifted as if suddenly hungry. First a creaking in the ropes, then a hissing, then a roar that shook every plank.

The men leaped to the ropes, tore sails, tied them, cursed—but their voices were shaky. "The sea is punishing us," one murmured, "it's taking back what we took from it." Others nodded, crossed themselves, and spat overboard.

The waves swelled, slapping hard against the hull, making the "Bunte Kuh" groan like a wounded animal. Splashes hit the men in the face, salty, cold, like blows.

Klaus gripped the steering wheel, his muscles tense, his face red with exertion. He yelled, "Shut up! This is a storm, no damn judgment! I'll steer you out of it, like always!" But his voice was drowned out by the howling wind, and his expression betrayed that he believed it himself, like a drunkard's final vow.

The one-eyed man stood near the mast, one eye glittering. "He insulted the sea," he shouted, just loud enough for the others to hear. "He laughed at the dead. And now the waves laugh back."

The men stared at Klaus, their hands clammy on the rope, their lips formed into prayers that no one answered. Every blow from the sea was like a blow to the captain, not just to the ship.

The boy clung to the railing, his heart pounding. He saw the waves looming, black and high, like walls of water that could collapse at any moment. And he sensed that this was no ordinary storm. It was as if the sea had truly decided: Now they're going to pay.

The "Colorful Cow" danced on the waves like a toy. Every movement threatened to tear it apart. And somewhere, deep within the roar of the wind, the boy thought he heard screams—the same voices of the men who had sent it into the sea days before.

The storm struck with full fury. Waves as high as houses crashed against the ship's side, water rushed over the deck, tearing barrels and men alike from the planks. One screamed before being swept into the darkness, then nothing more—just spray and silence.

"Hold on tight, you dogs!" Klaus roared, his hands like iron on the wheel. But the men barely heard. One screamed, "The sea takes whoever it wants! It takes the guilty!" And as the next one flew overboard, the others clung even tighter to the rope, their eyes wide like animals in a slaughterhouse.

Wood splintered, sails tore, the rudder creaked. The "Bunte Kuh" creaked like a dying giant. Every swell of the sea seemed a judgment. The men screamed, cursed, prayed—all at once, a chorus of fear, guilt, and madness.

The one-eyed man stood at the mast, his cloak wrapped around his shoulders, his eyes glinting coldly. "You see? The sea doesn't forget! It takes back what we stole from it!" His voice pierced through the roar of the wind, sharper than any blade. "And it won't rest as long as he still stands!" He pointed at Klaus, who was struggling at the helm like a madman.

Klaus shouted back, louder than the storm: "I stand here, and the sea shall come if it wills me! I will not die before you, not today!" But his eyes flickered, and the boy saw: He, too, believed that the water was more than just waves.

Another man disappeared, simply grabbed by a wall of breakers, like a doll into nothingness. The crew didn't see it as a coincidence. They saw it as a choice. And everyone secretly thought:*Am I next?*

The boy clung to a rope, his fingers numb. He watched the sea settle over them, like an executioner taking his time. And he knew: Here they weren't fighting against nature. They were fighting against memory. And memory never forgets.

The sea was no longer black; it was white with foam, wild, raging, a beast with a thousand teeth. Every breath was water, every step a fall. The deck was so wet and slippery that the men crawled more than walked.

Klaus was still standing at the helm, his hands bloody where the wood had torn his skin. His eyes glowed, his teeth bared. "Not yet, damn it! Not today!" he yelled, as if speaking directly to the sea. But the words were lost, swallowed by the roar of the waves.

The crew staggered, their faces pale, their lips bloody from biting. One screamed: "It wants him! It wants the captain! Give him up, then it'll let us live!" Immediately, a chorus of voices echoed back, roaring, hoarse, filled with panic: "Sacrifice him! Sacrifice him!"

Some jumped at Klaus, staggering, half-drowned in their own deck water. Ropes fluttered, ready to wrap themselves around his arms. But before they could grab him, Bone Man struck – wordlessly, as always. He threw two men back into the spray with a jerk, the planks shaking under his force.

But the one-eyed man laughed, a hard, cold laugh that was louder than the storm. "You see? Even the executioner protects him! But the sea laughs at fists! It doesn't want you – it wants*him*!" He pointed again at Klaus, who looked like a madman, a king on a wooden throne that the water was about to tear apart.

The boy clung to the mast, his heart racing. He knew the men were on the edge—on the edge of the ship, on the edge of madness. One more breaker, one more loss, and they would stop asking questions and act.

The "Colorful Cow" swayed, groaned, and splintered as if it itself were standing under the gallows.

And above all, in the roar of the waves, the boy heard it: a whisper, barely audible, but clear as bell steel –*the sea never forgets.*

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the storm struck. Not gentle, not friendly—more like an executioner stopping the axe halfway through just to make his victim dangle longer. The wind died down, the waves receded, and an eerie silence fell over the "Bunte Kuh."

The men lay panting on the planks, wet to the bone, their hands sore from the dew, their faces as pale as chalk. No one cheered. No one laughed. Everyone knew: This wasn't a victory. This was a delay.

Klaus was still standing at the helm, his bloody fingers clawing into the wood. His chest heaved, his sword hanging loosely in his hand. He laughed, hoarse, more a cough than triumph. "See? I told you! No storm will eat Störtebeker!" But his eyes betrayed that he didn't believe it himself.

The one-eyed man stepped out of the shadows, water dripping from his clothes, his eyes sparkling. "The sea does not forget," he said softly, but everyone heard. "Today it has spared us. But only because it knows we will

bear even more guilt." He smiled thinly, and the men bowed their heads, murmuring, cursing, praying quietly.

The boy stood at the bow, his heart still pounding like a drum. He knew they hadn't survived the storm—the storm had survived them. And he would return, as sure as the next morning.

The "Bunte Kuh" drifted heavily over the waves, its wood splintering, its ropes hung in tatters. She was a wreck that hadn't yet sunk—like her crew.

And above it all roared the sea, indifferent, ancient, unforgettable.

Bone man on board

After the storm, the "Bunte Kuh" was no longer a ship, but a half-graveyard. Planks splintered, sails hung like tattered flags, and the men dragged themselves across the deck like ghosts. No one spoke of victory, no one spoke of happiness. But one name was mentioned again and again, whispered, with glances at the giant, who, as always, remained silent:**Bone Man.**

"He saved us..." murmured one, his face still covered in salt and fear. "No," hissed another, "he only held us back because he wanted to. He's not human. The devil is inside him." "He can't die," said a third, "did you see how the waves didn't even wet him? Death took him long ago, but he's still running because he doesn't know what to do with himself."

They looked at him when they thought he didn't notice. Their gaze wandered over his broad shoulders, the steady hands that had struck down more men than all the knives combined. Some saw in him a savior. Others an executioner. But all saw in him something that wasn't their own.

Klaus stood at the helm, gritting his teeth when he heard the whispering. He knew the men no longer honored him. They feared him. But they feared Bone Man more. The captain felt it like a dagger on his neck: his greatest protection was also his greatest shadow.

The one-eyed man grinned, listened to the whispers, nodded when one spoke to him. "Yes, yes... perhaps he is more than a man. Perhaps he is the sign. The

sea wants him, not us. Or all of us, as long as he stays with us." He whispered the poison, letting it seep in like salt into a wound.

The boy watched everything. He saw Bone Man simply standing there, arms crossed, eyes empty. Not a word, not a smile, not an anger. Only silence. But there was more weight in this silence than in Klaus's roar, more fear than in any wave. And the boy sensed: The men would soon have to decide—whether they saw him as a shield or as a curse.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked softly, as if it were holding its breath, waiting for the outcome.

The next morning, the deck was still littered with wet ropes and broken barrels when a man wordlessly placed a bowl of soup before Bone Man. No comment, no glance—just an offering, the kind one makes to a god. Another placed a piece of bread before him, even though he himself had barely eaten a bite. No one asked, no one laughed. It was silent, reverent, frightened.

Bone Man didn't touch the offerings. He just stood there, leaning against the mast, his arms crossed, his eyes like a gray sea. But his silence made it worse. The men whispered, "He won't take it because he doesn't need anything human." Others nodded, breathing shallowly. "He lives on fear. On our blood."

From then on, they avoided him. Wherever he walked, they made way. No one sat beside him, no one dared to touch his shoulder. He was no longer a comrade, no longer a man in the pack—he was a talisman, a shadow. Some cast hopeful glances at him, as if he could ward off bullets and ropes. Others stepped back, as if they feared his shadow might rot them.

Klaus watched through gritted teeth. He saw how his own space diminished, how even his orders carried less weight than the silence of this colossus. "You believe in a man who doesn't even talk?" he yelled once, but the men just shrugged their shoulders, looked not at him, but at the skeleton—and remained silent. The silence was an answer.

The one-eyed man slunk through the ranks like a rat, whispering: "He protects you... or he curses you. He carries death in his hands. Just ask yourselves: for whom?" And again the men nodded, the seed grew.

The boy sat in the shadows and stared at the giant. He saw no god, no curse—only a man withdrawn into himself, so silent that the sea itself seemed like

chatter compared to him. But he also knew: on a ship, silence is louder than any words.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned, and it sounded as if it were laughing at its own passengers – who were building an idol out of flesh.

It began the night before, when rum loosened their tongues. Two men quarreled, first about dice, then about guilt, and finally about Bone Man.

"He's our guardian angel," slurred one, his eyes shining, "without him we would have drowned long ago!" "Guardian angel?" hissed the other, "he's the devil himself! Did you see? The sea spared him because he's already dead!"

The voices grew louder, men gathered, spat into the fire, and cursed. Soon half the deck was awake. "He's not one of us!" one shouted, "he's the mark of the curse!" Others roared back: "Without him, you would all have joined the Hanseatic League long ago!"

Their gazes wandered to Bone Man, who, as always, stood motionless at the mast, as if none of this concerned him. His eyes remained fixed, his hands loose, but the air crackled.

Then it happened: One of the men, goaded by the one-eyed man, stepped forward, drew his knife, his voice shrill: "If he is a man, he shall bleed like one!" He rushed forward, the blade flashing in the firelight.

The crew held their breath. Even Klaus opened his eyes wide, but he didn't move.

Bone Man didn't dodge. He let the man come, let him stab—and the next moment the attacker lay on the ground, the knife broken, his arm twisted unnaturally, the screams echoing across the deck. It hadn't been a fight. It was a blow, fast, hard, so simple that it looked as if the giant had merely squashed a mosquito.

Silence. Only the man's whimpering. Bone Man continued to stand motionless, as if nothing had happened. No triumph, no anger—only silence.

The men stared at him, their eyes wide. For some, he was now untouchable. For others, he was sinister.

The boy saw it and felt it: the distance between the men and this colossus had become permanent. They would never again see him as one of their own—only as something else. Something that meant more fear than salvation.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked softly, and it sounded as if it agreed with the verdict.

Klaus saw the men staring at Bone Man—not at him. He had held the helm, he had led them out of storms, he had roared until his throat bled. But a single blow from the Silent One, and they acted as if a god had spoken among them.

The captain gritted his teeth, rum dripping from his beard. He stepped forward and roared: "You dogs! You stare at a lump of flesh that can't even talk and forget who's leading you? Without me, you'd all be dead long ago! I'm the captain, not that... lump!"

A murmur went through the crew. No one objected out loud, but their eyes betrayed everything. They no longer nodded when Klaus spoke. They looked at Bone Man, who simply stood there, still as a mast, unshakeable as the sea.

The one-eyed man quietly stepped beside Klaus, his voice sweet as poison. "You scream, he stays silent. Which of you two seems stronger?" He let the words sink in, not loudly, not directly—but just enough for the men to hear them. "Sometimes you don't need a king when you have an executioner."

Klaus's face turned red, he reached for his saber, but he did nothing. He knew: He couldn't simply strike down a man like Bone Man, not without splitting the ship in half. And the one-eyed man's poison ate its way deeper while he remained silent.

The boy watched. He saw the captain, who became smaller the louder he screamed. He saw the giant who did nothing, yet grew larger the more fear he aroused. And he saw the one-eyed man, who grinned because he was weakening both of them—the one who screamed and the one who remained silent.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked and sounded as if it were mocking:*Two kings are one too many.*

It was worst at night. The creaking of the planks, the crashing of the waves—and in between, the silence of the Bone Man. He barely slept. He often stood at the railing, staring out into the darkness, as if he could hypnotize the sea. The men saw him, and that was enough.

"He talks to the dead," one whispered as he lay in his hammock. "No," hissed the other, "he is one himself. A corpse who doesn't know he's already rotting." A third murmured, "Perhaps he'll take us all to the gallows. He's the sign. As long as he's on board, not one of us will die free."

The voices grew quieter, but they didn't stop. Everyone had a story. One swore he'd seen Bone Man not bleed at all during the last fight, even though a knife had grazed him. Another claimed the storm had abated because Bone Man wanted it that way, not because the weather had changed.

During the day, people avoided him. No one wanted to eat next to him, no one wanted to turn their back on him. He was no longer a companion; he was a walking omen. Some secretly made signs with their fingers as they passed him, as if they had to ward off the devil himself.

Klaus saw it, seething inside. He wanted to scream, wanted to hit the man who overshadowed him so much—but he knew it wouldn't change anything. The Silent One grew with every whisper, with every fear. And he himself shrank the louder he raged.

The one-eyed man grinned when he heard the stories. He didn't even have to invent them. The men spun them themselves. All he had to do was sow a quiet "Maybe" or "Did you see it too?" here and there. And superstition grew like mold on moist bread.

The boy lay awake at night, heard the whispering, saw the skeleton at the railing, silent, motionless, gigantic. He felt pity, and yet also fear. For he understood: On this ship, silence was more dangerous than any cannon.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned as if she herself were whispering:*Galgenholz knows his men.*

It happened on a gray morning when the sea was calm, too calm. One of the men—still drunk from the night before, his eyes red, his throat dry—suddenly yelled: "He's the curse! Throw him overboard, and we'll be free!"

The word hung in the air like lightning that never strikes. Immediately, two others grabbed ropes, their fingers greedily, their lips trembling. A third shouted: "Yes! Tie him up! He's not one of us!" And the crowd slowly edged closer, uncertain, but filled with hatred and fear, finally seeking a body.

Klaus stood motionless, his hand on his sword, but he didn't move. He knew that if he defended Bone Man now, it would look like weakness. If he remained silent, he could benefit himself. His teeth ground, but he did nothing.

The one-eyed man grinned narrowly, his eye glittering. "Perhaps the sea wants him. Perhaps it has wanted him for a long time." His words dripped into the wood like poison.

The men lifted the ropes and approached, their steps uncertain, but each breathing faster, as if they could already smell the blood.

Bone Man didn't move until the ropes were almost touching his skin. Slowly, he stood upright, a shadow taller than the mast itself. He looked at her—just looked. No words, no scream, no blow. His gaze was empty, cold, and yet deeper than the sea.

The men froze. One dropped the rope. Another stepped back, stumbled. They muttered, stammered, and suddenly they stepped back like children who had called the devil by name. No one dared to touch him.

Silence. Only the creaking of the planks and the distant sound of the waves.

Klaus growled and spat, as if trying to break the tension. "Cowards. You don't even have the balls to tie a pig." But even his voice sounded hollow, because he knew he hadn't dared either.

The one-eyed man grinned wider. Silence had triumphed—for now.

The boy stood at the bow, his hands sweating. He understood that it wasn't fists, nor blades, that saved Bone Man. It was his silence. The silence that lay like a noose around the men's throats, choking them before they even touched him.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned, and this time its creaking sounded like a warning sigh:*You don't hang someone who is already dying.*

The fleet of fine gentlemen

It began as always: a shout from the lookout. "Sails on the horizon!" Immediately, the deck was filled with voices, shouts, and laughter. After days of

decay and superstition, greed burned in their eyes again. "Prey!" they cried, "prey at last!"

The men grabbed axes, cutlasses, and ripped open barrels as if they were drinking to give themselves courage before battle. One spat into his hands and shouted: "The sea has cursed us enough—now we have gold as our apology!" Laughter, loud roars, rum, the old greed—for a moment, the "Bunte Kuh" seemed to be a pirate ship again.

But then the second voice came from the lookout, shriller, more brittle. "Not one... not two... more!" All heads shot up, all eyes on the line between sky and water.

There weren't just sails. There were many sails. White surfaces glittering in the sun like a set of teeth. First five, then seven, then more—a whole wall of ships slowly approaching, evenly, in order, no traders, no sheep. They were wolves.

A murmur went through the crew. The initial cries for gold died down, the laughter broke off. One whispered: "Those are Hanseatic cogs..." Another: "These fine gentlemen have sent their entire fleet."

Klaus stood at the helm with his legs wide apart, his beard dripping, his eyes glowing. He laughed, loud, harsh, exaggerated. "So what? Let them come, those fine gentlemen with their white sails! We'll take them one by one, and when the sea is full of blood, they'll know who Störtebeker is!"

But the men weren't laughing along. They saw the sails growing larger and larger and sensed: This wasn't prey. This was a hunt. And they were the prey.

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, grinning narrowly. "These gentlemen don't come to bargain," he murmured. "They come to settle accounts."

The boy stood at the bow, his eyes fixed on the white wall of sails. It dawned on him: the sea had already revealed its memory to them. Now the humans were coming to pronounce judgment.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked softly, as if it itself were afraid that its rotten planks would soon burst between cannonballs.

The sun was high as the first drums echoed across the water. Muffled, steady, like the heartbeat of an army. The white sails were now so close that the banners could be recognized—the Hanseatic League's coat of arms, black, red,

and gold, fluttering in the wind like a threat. Below the sails flashed rows of lances, suits of armor, and cannon barrels. Not traders. Warriors.

The men on the "Bunte Kuh" fell silent. Even the clinking of the cups fell silent. They stood there, with axes and knives, but there was nothing of the old greed in their eyes. Only the stark realization: This wasn't loot. This was execution.

Klaus stood on the table, jug in hand, sword at his belt. His laughter boomed, louder than the drums, but it sounded hoarse, like a rooster who knows the axe is already being sharpened. "Do you see them, the fine gentlemen? With their shining sails, their clean faces? They think they're better than us! But we—we are the sea! We drink, we fight, we die like kings, not like dogs!"

He raised the jug, downed the rum, let his beard drip, and roared: "Who among you wants to die with a full stomach and an empty heart? Come on, drink, grit your teeth, and when the gentlemen come, we'll rip out their throats!"

A few men roared, more out of fear than courage. Others stared silently, their fingers nervously on the rope, their eyes fixed on the sails, which were drawing ever closer.

The one-eyed man grinned. "He wants you to drink so you'll forget that we lost long ago." He whispered it, not loudly, but enough that it spread like a plague. "He wants to stun you until you're dead."

Klaus swung his sword, his muscles tensed, his eyes blood red. "We won't die today! Not at their hands! Today the Hanseatic League will die!" But his roar bounced off the banners of the noble lords like a stone off a wall.

The boy stood still, feeling the drums in his chest. Each beat sounded like a sentence already written. He knew: Rum wouldn't save them. Steel, perhaps. But not against a fleet.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked as if it itself understood that it was no longer a ship, but just a coffin.

The first bang came like a clap of thunder. The air ripped open, and a dull thud echoed across the water. Seconds later, a fountain sprayed up next to the "Bunte Kuh," as high as the mast: water and smoke, salt and sulfur. The men screamed, threw themselves to the ground, some laughing hysterically, as if it were a joke.

Then came the second shot. This time the iron slammed into the middle of the water barrel at the bow, wood splintered, water and rum mixed, and the ship's scream was louder than the men's.

The Hanseatic cogs advanced like a wall, slowly, surely, and their cannons flashed again. "Fire!" echoed across the sea – and a hail of iron raged. Bullets whistled, planks splintered, sails ripped. The deck shook, and the "Bunte Kuh" groaned like an animal losing a piece of its flesh with every blow.

The men ran, screaming, some reaching for buckets, others for axes, some for rum. One yelled, "We have no chance!" and immediately another punched him in the face: "Shut up, or we're already dead!"

Klaus stood at the helm, sword raised, hair blowing in the wind, and roared like a madman. "Come on, you dogs! Fight! This is our dance, this is our song! We won't die on the gallows, we'll die in the fire!" His words flew into the chaos, but they no longer burned. They were merely sparks in the storm.

The one-eyed man grinned coldly. "He calls it a song. I call it a lament." He spoke softly, but the men heard, and in their eyes lay the fear that no rum could drown.

The boy crawled between barrels, his hands clammy, his ears filled with the roar of the cannons. He saw how the sea itself seemed to boil, full of smoke, full of blood. And he knew: This was no longer a fight. This was a slaughter.

The "Bunte Kuh" creaked, splintered, and groaned—a wreck that nevertheless didn't sink. Not yet.

Klaus screamed like a madman, the veins in his neck thicker than ropes. "Take out the hook! Burn their sails! If we go down, we'll go down with those fine gentlemen in hell!"

The men screamed, this time not in fear, but in rage, half forced, half genuine. They grabbed the grappling hooks and swung them over the railing. Iron clanged against wood, ropes taut, and the "Bunte Kuh" was pulled toward the first Hanseatic cog like a mangy dog clinging to its master's throat.

The first jump: a pirate flew over the railing, knife between his teeth, eyes glazed over with rum and madness. He landed amidst the Hanseatic soldiers, and in the next breath, he was a lump of flesh, impaled by three spears. His scream shrieked—then fell silent. But the others jumped after him. One after the other.

Swords clanged, axes hacked, blood sprayed across deck and sails. Men wrestled, bit, and stabbed. Cannons continued to roar, bullets devoured wood and bone alike. The air stank of gunpowder, iron, and warm blood.

Klaus himself leaped in, his sword like a torch, and struck like a butcher who'd forgotten when enough was enough. Every blow a head, every turn a scream. "See, you dogs! This is freedom! This is glory!" he roared, the blade singing in the flesh.

Bone Man didn't walk—he charged. A tower of muscle, his hands empty, but deadly. He grabbed men like puppets, broke them over his knees, threw them overboard, crushed skulls with his bare fists. Not a word, only blood, and the silence made him even more terrifying than any cannon.

The one-eyed man remained aboard the "Colorful Cow," grinning and watching men fall. "Kill each other," he muttered. "Every death makes my game easier."

The boy ducked, trembling, but the images burned into his heart: brothers stabbing like strangers, bodies tipping overboard, blood staining the sea until it looked as if it was no longer the moon that was vomiting, but the water itself.

The “Bunte Kuh” groaned, pulled another cog closer, splintering, burning, and the battle raged on – man against man, death against death.

The Hanseatic League's response came swiftly. Flaming arrows hissed from the cogs, one after the other, like a cloud of glowing insects. They buzzed through the air, slamming into the sails, the ropes, the wood. And the "Bunte Kuh" began to burn. First small flames, then a hiss, then a chorus of fire that devoured each other like hungry dogs.

The men screamed, some tried to extinguish the fire with buckets, but the sea laughed at them—every wave they scooped up was too small. Others laughed, screamed, and plunged directly into the enemy with the fire at their backs, as if trying to carry their own flames.

Klaus raged, his hair covered in sparks, his sword soaked in blood. "Burn! Burn with me! But take her with you into the embers!" He punched, kicked, and laughed like a man who had long since known that the only thing that mattered was dying, not how.

Bone Man tore down the burning ropes, hurled the flames back, grabbed soldiers crawling across his own ship, and threw them back onto their cog like torches. His silence was more cruel than any war cry.

The men of the "Bunte Kuh" fought like madmen. Not for gold, not for glory—simply because there was nothing else left. The fire consumed the planks, the gunpowder store crackled as if already giggling at the big bang that was yet to come.

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, his eyes glittering like fire itself. "Look," he murmured, "now the ship will swallow them all." He didn't help anyone, didn't hit, didn't run. He just waited.

The boy ducked, the smoke burning in his lungs. He saw men fall overboard, burning, others leap into the fire, laughing, as if it were their last dance. The wood creaked, splintered, sparks flew, and the sea was red and gold, as if hell itself had swallowed heaven.

The "Bunte Kuh" was no longer a ship. It was a burning coffin, sliding deeper into the sea with every bang.

The "Bunte Kuh" was a burning bell, and its ringing was the cracking of wood and the screams of men. All around, the white sails drew tighter, a circle of death. Arrows, bullets, grappling hooks—the air was full of them. No more sky, only smoke and iron.

Klaus stood at the helm, his beard half-singed, his sword black with blood. He roared, coughed, laughed, all at once. "Come on, you fine dogs! I won't die alone! I'll drag you into the depths until your gold smells like shit!" His voice echoed, but it was the bark of an animal long since trapped.

The crew staggered between flames and iron. Some still fought, screamed, stabbed, and bit. Others threw down their weapons, prayed, spat, and stumbled over corpses. A few tried to jump into the water—but the cogs were waiting with spears and nets.

Bone Man stood in the middle of the fire, the wood crackling beneath his feet, but he barely moved. Everyone who came near fell. He swiped them down like one swatted flies. No word, no scream, just fists and blood. But even he couldn't break the ring.

The one-eyed man stood motionless in the shadow of the mast, his eyes cold. He knew: This was the moment he had always wanted. Not victory, not gold—just the end. And he grinned as the men screamed.

The boy pressed himself against the railing, smoke in his throat, tears in his eyes, salt on his skin. He saw that this was no longer a fight. No victory, no

freedom, no spoils. It was only a choice between flame, iron, or water. Life had long been lost—only the way of dying remained.

The “Colorful Cow” splintered, burned, crashed, creaked, and its last sound sounded like a groan falling into the sea.

And the fleet of fine gentlemen closed the circle, slowly, mercilessly, as if they had all the time in the world.

Störtebeker's rusty crown

The fire continued to devour the "Bunte Kuh," smoke whipped across the deck, men stumbled among blood and splinters. But in the midst of this chaos stood Klaus, laughing like a madman, and in his hand glittered not gold, not jewels—but a dented iron ring, an old piece of helmet, rusted, bent, stinking of salt and blood.

He placed it on his head, crooked, ridiculous, as if it were a crown. "Look here, you dogs!" he roared, his eyes wild, his teeth blood-red. "Here stands your king! Not an emperor, not a fine gentleman with silk trousers! I am Störtebeker—crowned by rust, by dirt, by the sea itself!"

A few men roared, more out of desperation than faith. They raised their fists and shouted, but their eyes showed pure fear. Others just stared, their mouths open, as if they were watching a madman adorning himself with his own rope.

Klaus continued to laugh, swinging his sword, the iron on his head clattering with every movement. "Let the Hanseatic League come! Let the sea itself rise! I will not die a dog—I will die a king! And my crown will rust longer than their banners fly!"

But the laughter sounded hollow, it clanged like the iron on his skull.

The one-eyed man stepped forward, his mouth twisted into a cold grin. "Behold your king..." he said quietly, yet everyone heard. "His gold is rust. His glory is filth. And his kingdom—is burning." A murmur went through the crew, a bitter, malicious laugh, half fear, half hate.

Bone Man stood silently beside Klaus, motionless, like a dark mast. He saw the crown, and for a moment something flitted across his face—not mockery, not anger, just sadness.

The boy stood aside, his heart heavy. He saw the man who had once been feared and realized: his crown was not made of gold, but of madness. And the sea laughed at both.

The “Bunte Kuh” creaked deeply, as if it itself were coughing at the spectacle of its captain.

With the iron ring on his skull, Klaus was no longer a captain—he was a caricature. But he was a loud caricature, one who roared until even the cannons seemed to fall silent for a moment. "Forward, you dogs! Let the fine gentlemen see how kings die!"

He rushed forward, leaping over the burning rope, blade in hand, the rusty thing on his head. Every blow spurted blood, every laugh echoed like the clang of iron. Men screamed his name, others spat it out—but they followed. Not out of loyalty, but because there was nothing else.

They jumped with him over the railing and into the Hanseatic cogs, where spears were already waiting. Some pirates were immediately impaled, like fish at a market. Others fell fighting, hacking, stabbing, and biting, while Klaus raged in the middle, the iron on his head gleaming in the firelight.

"Look at him!" cried the one-eyed man, who remained safely on board. His voice was sharp, his eyes glittering. "Your king—crowned by rust, not glory! Every blow he strikes only drags you deeper into the grave!" The men heard it, amid the din, and the words stung harder than arrows.

Bone Man leaped after Klaus, his fists like storm waves, every soldier who touched him fell. He didn't speak, he didn't scream—he was just pure violence. But even he couldn't stop the sea from drinking more and more blood, from the cogs tearing the "Colorful Cow" apart like hungry sharks.

The boy ducked, trembling, his heart racing. He saw Klaus, his rusty crown on his head, bathing in blood, and he knew: The men no longer followed a king. They followed only a madness that would consume them all.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned, its planks red, and its creaking sounded like laughter at its own burning king.

It had to happen. Klaus stumbled amidst the smoke, clanging swords, and fire, the rusty iron askew on his forehead, his face covered in sweat and blood. A Hanseatic soldier, young, with eyes as wide as a child's, stabbed blindly forward—and the blade tore through Klaus's side.

The captain roared, a sound half lion, half beast in the slaughterhouse. Blood spurted, dripping warmly over the rusty crown, which slipped from his head at the blow and clattered across the planks. A king without a crown, just a man bleeding.

The crew froze for a moment. They saw him stagger, his hand on his wound, his sword still steady, but weaker. One cried, "He's fallen!" Another, "No, he's still alive!" But no one rushed to him. No one carried him. Everyone just stared, as if they had finally seen that their king was nothing but flesh.

Klaus stood up, blood pouring from him like a slashed barrel. He raised his sword, his laughter raspy and raspy. "See? I'm not dying! Not today! Not at the hands of you fine dogs!" He stepped forward, struck, but lacked the power. The blow was weak, the movement lame.

The one-eyed man laughed, his voice dripping with venom. "Behold your king! A man who believes rust is a crown and blood a kingdom. Do you really want to die with him?" The words rippled into the chaos, and some men slumped, others roared in defiance—but the doubt remained.

Bone Man stood behind Klaus, continued to beat him, protected him, but even he couldn't prevent the sight of the rusty crown from remaining in the crew's blood like a brand.

The boy saw the iron lying in the dirt, half burned, half rusted, and he realized: This wasn't a crown. This was a joke. And the joke cost them all their lives.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned in the fire, and its creaking sounded as if it were laughing at its king, who was more of a fool than a ruler.

Klaus staggered, his side blood red, his sword still raised, as if his strength had long since drained from him. His gaze wandered across the deck until he saw the rusty crown lying in the dirt. He roared, hoarse and raspy: "Give it to me! My crown! It's mine!"

One of the pirates picked it up—not out of respect, but as one might pick up an old shoe from the ground. He held it in his hand, hesitant, and saw the captain

swaying like a drunk. "This?" he muttered, "this is nothing but rust..." He spat, about to throw it away.

But Klaus lunged forward, grabbing him by the collar, despite the blood, despite his weakness. "Rust or not – it's mine! I am the king! You dogs! Without me, you are nothing!" His voice broke, a wheeze more than a roar, but the hand on the man's throat was strong enough that no one laughed.

Some pirates shouted in defiance, banging their axes on the wood: "King! King!" But in their eyes lay pure madness, not faith. Others grumbled and cursed, one shouted: "A king who eats rust is no king!" He immediately received a blow to the face, from whom it was unclear – but the division was there, open, and bloody.

The one-eyed man stepped forward, grinning broadly, one eye cold as steel. "Look! He needs a crown made of scrap metal to think he's anything. Your king is a fool. And you don't lead fools—you hang them." His words were like poison, and the crew absorbed them, even as they yelled "King!"

Bone Man stood next to Klaus, his fists still bloody. He said nothing, did nothing—but his shadow alone made it clear: whoever touched the crown was in trouble with him.

The boy saw it, saw the rusty crown in Klaus's bloody hands, and he knew: This wasn't a sign of power, but of despair. A man who crowns his end with rust drags everyone else into the abyss with him.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked, the fire burned deeper, and its sound sounded like mockery:*A king of rust, an empire of ash.*

Klaus stood in the middle of the burning deck, blood dripping from his side, smoke burning his eyes, but he held the rusty crown high above his head as if it were gold, as if it were the sword of God. His cry rang out over the roar of the flames: "Look! I am your king! Rust or not, I die with my crown—and you die with me!"

The men stared at him, some shouting along, raising axes, pounding on the wood until splinters flew. Others averted their eyes, spat into the embers. Amidst the cheers and scorn, his image hung like a flag long since torn to shreds.

The one-eyed man laughed, loudly, piercingly. "Yes, die with him, die for a king who wears rust instead of gold! Die for a fool whose crown is more shame than

glory!" His words echoed through the chaos, finding ears that believed more than any blade.

Bone Man stood beside Klaus, a rock in the fire. He didn't move, didn't speak. But his gaze fell on the crown, and in his eyes lay a silence that was louder than anything else: He knew that this crown meant nothing. Only death.

But Klaus grinned, his face contorted with blood, his teeth red, his eyes empty. "The sea cannot break me! The Hanseatic League cannot break me! As long as this crown shines above me, I am king—even in hell!" He laughed, a sound like a cough, a rattle that was smothered in the smoke.

The boy saw the iron gleaming, rusty, ugly, pitiful, and he knew: The sea was no longer laughing with him; it was laughing at him. At all of them. At a realm of ash, crowned with rust.

The "Bunte Kuh" splintered, a mast cracked, sparks flew. And the ship's creaking sounded as if it were calling:*Your king dies – and you with him.*

Klaus staggered, the rusty crown still in one hand, the sword in the other, but his body had long since been empty. Every step was a fall, every breath a gasp. Blood dripped from him, mingling with the smoke, the sparks, the screams.

He raised the crown one last time, his arms trembling, the iron clanging. "Your king..." he rasped, his voice barely more than a breath of wind. "I... am your king..." Then his knees buckled. He fell to the planks, his sword clanging away, the crown rolled from his hand and landed next to his head—rusty, crooked, worthless.

The men stood silent. Some raised their fists and roared "King!" in hoarse voices, a desperate bark, more of a curse than an honor. Others spat into the fire, looking away as if they'd seen enough. But all knew: He had fallen, and with him, their last hope.

The one-eyed man approached, one eye cold as iron. "Behold your king," he said softly, "crowned by rust, overthrown in the fire. A king without a kingdom. A fool without a laugh." The words sank deeper than any bullet, deeper than any knife.

Bone Man stood motionless, his fists red, his face stony. He didn't bend, he didn't pick up the crown. He left it where it belonged—in the dirt.

The boy saw it, the image: a dead captain, a rusty crown, a burning "Colorful Cow." He understood: the men weren't yelling "King" out of loyalty, but because there was nothing else left to say. Their voices weren't an honor. They were a curse.

The “Colorful Cow” splintered, creaked, and its last sound was like bitter laughter – over a king of rust whose kingdom was ashes.

The dance on wet planks

The deck was slippery with blood and seawater, the fire ate through the masts, sparks flew like mocking confetti. And suddenly, as if the men had realized they were doomed anyway, laughter erupted. Loud, off-key, insane. One man tore a violin from a broken barrel, stroked the strings with bloody fingers—off-key, shrill, but a song. Another began to stagger in circles, his bare feet in the water, which was already ankle-deep.

Soon several were dancing. They spun, sang, spat rum into the air, and caught it again with their mouths open. One shouted, "We'll dance until the sea eats us!" – and the men roared, stamping their feet in time so that the deck shook.

Others mingled with them with swords, striking like footsteps, hacking at Hanseatic soldiers while laughing as if they were dance partners. Blood splashed, mingling with water and rum, and the deck became a stage, wet and burning at once.

In the middle lay Klaus, the rusty crown next to his head. No one cried, no one remained silent for him. They danced around him as if he were merely part of the decoration, a flag in the dirt. "Our king is watching!" someone yelled, pouring rum over the corpse, laughing, falling next to it himself, and thrashing the planks to the rhythm.

The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, grinning coldly. "Just dance, dance," he murmured, "every step brings you closer to the rope." He didn't even need to be loud; the men did it all by themselves.

Bone Man stomped through the crowd, his fists heavy as iron, striking down soldiers who got among the dancers. But his silence seemed out of place—a rock in the middle of a carnival of madness.

The boy stood at the bow, his eyes wide open. He saw men dancing, laughing, dying, all at once. And he understood: This was no longer a fight. This was their last dance, a grotesque celebration on wet planks before the rope would take them.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked as if it were clapping along to the beat, its wood trembling in the rhythm of its demise.

The dance became wilder, more lopsided, more brutal. Men grabbed each other, laughed, kissed with bloody lips, only to plunge their knives into each other's sides in the next breath. They staggered, spun, fell into the water, and got up again, their eyes glowing, as if they were no longer human, but puppets of madness.

One climbed onto a half-burned barrel, spread his arms, and sang an old pub song in a hoarse voice. Two others threw him off, stamped on his chest in time until he was just wheezing—and laughed as if they'd told a bad joke.

Rum bottles flew like torches, some full of fire, some empty, some half-full and tipped directly into thirsty mouths. The flames licked at the ropes, the planks slipped, the air stank of burnt flesh.

"Dance, brothers!" one shouted, his voice already half-eaten by smoke. "Dance before the rope takes us!" And the men danced, stamped, laughed, and sang, while the sea creaked ever narrower around them under the weight of the Hanseatic cogs.

Klaus still lay among them, the rusty crown beside his head, his face a mask of blood. But now someone bent over him, took the crown, placed it on his own head, and began to dance on his dead captain. The men cheered, roared, and threw cups and bones into the air.

The one-eyed man laughed softly, a cold laugh that was nevertheless audible. "Look," he murmured, "every one of you wants to be king—and none of you will live until tomorrow." His words met with no resistance. They were simply the truth, wrapped in poison.

Bone Man continued to struggle on, but his gaze wandered once over the dancers, and there was something in his eyes that could almost be called regret.

The boy stood there petrified. He saw the men hugging and stabbing each other, kissing and strangling each other, dancing and dying. And he knew: This

wasn't a dance of freedom. This was a dance on planks that were already gallows wood.

The “Colorful Cow” creaked deeper, as if it were counting its own steps – and each step was a step closer to the rope.

The Hanseatic cogs approached, the drums pounded, and then the first soldiers leaped over the railing. Iron armor clanged, swords flashed, shields clanged. They charged into the chaos—and found not an orderly battle, but a witches' sabbath.

The pirates danced toward them, laughing, singing, and shouting. One grabbed a soldier, kissed his helmet, and then rammed his axe into his neck. Another stumbled, drunken, and fell into the arms of a Hanseatic warrior. Both wrestled, staggered, and fell into the flames together.

Rum bottles shattered, blood spurted, wood splintered. The fire devoured sails and ropes, while men danced in circles, with axes, daggers, and bare fists. The dance no longer had a direction, only one goal: to drag everything into the depths.

The Hanseatic soldiers fought hard and with discipline, but even they stumbled in the chaos, because the pirates fought not like humans, but like madmen. Every step was a blow, every scream a song, every death just another beat in this mad dance.

Klaus's body lay there, unnoticed, the crown long gone, while men stepped, danced, and fell over him. The one-eyed man stood in the shadows, grinning, his voice sharper than swords: "Dance, you dogs, dance! Every one of you dances for the rope!"

Bone Man stood like a rock amidst the flames. He struck down soldiers, his hands red, his body black with smoke. He didn't speak, he didn't roar, he was just pure violence, a silent colossus who held the stage of madness together for just a moment.

The boy ducked, peering through the smoke and blood, his heart racing. He understood: This was no longer a fight, a battle, or a celebration. It was a massacre, a dance that knew no victor—only spectators. And the only spectator that mattered was the sea.

The “Colorful Cow” groaned, the wood splintered, and its sound was like the laughter of a gallows already bent over the necks.

The deck groaned under the weight of fire, blood, and iron. Every step made it creak, every blow sent splinters flying. And then, in the midst of the madness, a piece of planking broke away with a crash. Two men—one a pirate, one a Hanseatic warrior—staggered, still laughing, wedged together, and plunged into the water, which greedily swallowed them.

The crack widened. Water shot upward, as if the sea itself wanted to join the stage. Men screamed, jumped back, but others laughed, continued dancing, and stamped on the wet boards, as if the cracking only irritated them further.

“The gallows are already tearing us down!” one of them yelled, laughing, and jumped into the crack himself, his arms outstretched as if in a macabre baptism.

More and more planks gave way. The fire ate away at the beams, the heat cracked the wood, and the "Colorful Cow" splintered into pieces that, even as it sank, still trembled to the rhythm of the dancers.

The Hanseatic warriors continued to fight, but now they too stumbled, slipped, and fell into the sea. Iron armor immediately pulled them under, and their screams gurgled like bubbles. The pirates continued to laugh, sing, and stamp their feet until they themselves slipped, jumped, and disappeared.

Bone Man still stood, his fists bloody, his face blank. He struck, he held, but the wood around him too broke away, as if the sea were saying, "Even you dance, whether you want to or not."

The one-eyed man grinned, holding onto a rope as men disappeared around him. "See, you dogs?" he shouted, his voice sharp as a knife. "Your dance will only lead you into the water! And there you hang, without a rope, without a judge—only the sea!"

The boy held on to the mast, his eyes wide. He saw men laughing as they drowned, others singing until the water filled their mouths. He understood: the dance was no longer a celebration. It was a fall. A dance into the sea that had long since set the pace.

The “Colorful Cow” splintered louder, cracked, groaned, and its groaning sounded like the song of a gallows that is about to devour its prey.

The ship was no longer a ship. It was a burning cross, a sinking coffin, a dance floor of ash and salt. Flames licked up the masts, planks cracked like rotten

bone, water shot through the cracks, and the "Bunte Kuh" groaned as if she herself were begging for mercy.

Men screamed, sang, jumped, laughed—all at once. Some threw themselves into the sea as if into the arms of a lover. Others fought to the last blow, their swords blunt, their arms weak, but their eyes filled with madness. A few knelt in the middle of the burning deck, praying as the fire singed their hair.

Klaus still lay dead between them, the rusty crown next to his head. Someone tripped over him, stepped on the crown, and it shattered into two pieces—no one paid any attention. Even the king's symbol was now just scrap in the fire.

Bone Man stood as long as he could, his fists heavy, his face a mask of smoke and blood. He continued to strike when nothing around him held him. Finally, a mast crashed, swept him away, and he disappeared into the chaos, silent, as if the sea itself had swallowed his voice forever.

The one-eyed man held onto a rope, laughing coldly, the flames reflected in his eyes. "Yes! So ends your dance!" he cried, "a feast for hell!" His voice echoed as men fell into the sea, one after another.

The boy clung to the bow, his fingers bloody from the wood, his lungs filled with smoke. He watched the men disappear, one by one, as if the sea had chosen them. Not all of them, not randomly—only those it wanted. He sensed that the sea didn't forget, didn't forgive. It took whomever it wanted.

The "Bunte Kuh" cracked, splintered, and then came the great rupture – the deck split, and the ship sank, flames and water mingling into a single maw. Men screamed, some still laughed, but everything was drowned out by the roar.

The sea closed over them as if nothing had ever happened.

When the smoke cleared, nothing remained but flotsam. Planks, barrels, bodies. Bodies everywhere. Some floated with their eyes open, the stars reflected in them like cold candles. Others were half-burned, their skin black, their teeth bare. The sea rocked them gently, as if it had only lulled them tiredly to sleep.

A few living creatures still swam among them. Wheezing, coughing, their fingers clammy on the wood. One was still laughing, choking as if he'd forgotten the dance was over. Another was singing a shaky ballad that drowned out by the gurgle.

The one-eyed man hung from a board, his eye glittering, his mouth grinning. "You see," he murmured, half to himself, half to the dead, "the dance was just a rehearsal. The gallows still awaits."

There was no sign of the Bone Man. Perhaps he had gone down with the mast, perhaps he was floating somewhere quietly, alone, like a shadow. But for the men, he had disappeared—and the silence was heavier than any scream.

The boy clung to a piece of the railing, his body trembling, his eyes wide. He saw the others dying around him, one by one. Some begged for help, others cursed, still others sang until the sea filled their mouths.

He knew the dance was over. But the song of the gallows hadn't yet begun. The Hanseatic cogs were still circling, their banners fluttering, and men were already rowing up in boats, carrying ropes, nets, and cold faces.

The "Colorful Cow" was gone. Almost all of the dancers were gone. But the sea had only done half of it. The gallows would take care of the rest.

And in the silence between the waves and the screams, it sounded as if the sea were humming softly – a final song for those who still breathed.

The price of freedom

The sea was calm, too calm. Only the creaking of the Hanseatic cogs and the beating of oars broke the silence. Boats glided across the water, nets were cast as if for a hunt—and the prey were not fish, but men.

The pirates who were still alive hung from the boards, barrels, and splinters of the "Colorful Cow." They coughed, wheezed, laughed, and cried. Some clung to their wood as if they could still float freely. But the rowers approached, firm and disciplined, and the hooks pulled them out like cattle.

One of the pirates spat in the Hansemann's face before being struck down with the oar handle. Another begged, kneeling in the boat with his hands folded, until iron shackles were placed on him. Yet another laughed, clucking like a chicken, until he was beaten into the canoe by two soldiers.

The one-eyed man hung from a plank, his eye glittering, his laughter cold. When the rowers grabbed him, he simply said, "Too late, you dogs. We're already dead." They beat him, but he continued to grin, even with blood in his mouth.

No trace of the Bone Man. Neither corpse nor living colossus. He had vanished, as if sucked into the sea. Some pirates whispered as they were tied up, "He's still alive. He'll be back." Others remained silent, knowing it was only a fairy tale they clung to like the splinters of the ship.

The boy was dragged up by his arms by two Hanseatic men, coughing, gasping, his fingers sore from the wood. They threw him into the boat as if he were a wet sack. Iron clanged, chains around his ankles, shackles around his wrists. Cold iron that weighed heavier than any sea.

The freedom for which they had drunk, shouted, and murdered still floated in the water. But the men who had lived it now lay in nets, bound, spat upon, on the enemy's cogs.

And the sea was silent, as if it had all been a bad joke.

The survivors were pulled like fish from nets, one by one. No sooner had they reached the deck of the Hanseatic cogs than boots and blows rained down on them. Iron bars, knobs, spears—it was no longer a fight, just a ritual.

"There they are, the kings of the sea!" roared a Hanseatic officer, a fat man with a red face, and kicked a prisoner in the face until his teeth spewed across the planks. Laughter echoed. "Look at them! They stink of rum and blood—and now they're supposed to tell us what freedom is worth!"

The pirates screamed back. One spat on the officer's boots. Immediately, five men beat him until he lay motionless. Another laughed loudly and hoarsely: "You dogs, we had more freedom in the dirt than you did in your palaces!" They beat him, but he continued to laugh, bloody, until the boots silenced him.

A third, young, with barely a beard on his face, pleaded, knelt, and promised to reveal everything—ports, routes, names. The Hanseatics laughed, threw him back to the others, and one hissed: "One who begs for mercy is worth less than his rope."

The one-eyed man stood between them, bound, his eyes cold, his smile broad. "Kick, hit," he whispered, "every blow makes us bigger. Because if you hang us,

we'll continue to hang in your heads." A soldier smashed his rifle butt into his face, but even though he was bleeding, he was still grinning.

The men were chained together, row upon row, their hands behind their backs, their feet bound. Some wept, others remained silent, some sang, hoarsely, an old song about rum and the gallows.

The boy lay on the planks, his ribs aching, his skin raw from the rope. He saw them all laid side by side like cattle, and he sensed: their freedom had never been real. They had only stolen it, and now the reckoning was coming—with rope, irons, and ridicule.

The Hanseatic banners fluttered, and only the laughter of the victors echoed across the deck.

The pirates lay chained to the planks, their faces bloody, their bodies exhausted. But the Hanseatic League men were in no hurry; they enjoyed the spectacle. One produced a thick rope, swung it like a showman at a fair, and laughed: "Look, dogs! We've already counted more ropes than you have heads. Everyone gets their own—a fine luxury for scoundrels like you!"

Laughter, yelling, kicking. The pirates spat back, some shouting curses, others remaining silent.

Then the Hanseatic men carried the prisoners forward and placed them at the railing like trophies. Voices could also be heard from the other cogs: applause, mockery. "There they are! The kings of the sea!" one shouted. "Now they're dancing on the rope!" The words echoed across the waves, louder than the wind.

One of the bound pirates tore himself free and, with his hands still in irons, jumped over the railing, straight into the sea. A scream, a splash, and immediately harpoons were in the water, as if they had been waiting for just such a prank. The blood spread quickly, red on black-blue. The laughter grew louder.

The one-eyed man grinned, his eye glistening despite the blood on his face. "Just do your show," he mocked, "our freedom is already in your bones, whether you like it or not. You hang us—and yet we sleep in your beds." A Hanseatic officer struck him in the face with the butt of his sword, but he just spat blood and laughed.

The men on the cogs began to roar songs, malicious and loud, about pirates squirming on the gallows. Some prisoners shouted back, singing their own verses, dirty, full of rum and whores, until their voices were broken by blows.

The boy stood among them, the chains on his hands and feet, his ribs burning. He saw the crowd, the spectators, the soldiers—and he understood: They wouldn't just die. They would die as a spectacle. Their death would be a celebration for the gentlemen.

The freedom they bled for ended not with a sword in their stomachs, but with a rope around their necks – and applause.

The “Bunte Kuh” had sunk, but its last song still echoed: the creaking of gallows wood.

The prisoners were lined up in a row, their hands bound, their feet heavy with irons. They knelt in the dirt of the deck while the Hanseatic men laughed and adjusted their helmets. Then the officer stepped forward—the fat one with the red face, sweating like a pig in summer. He held a roll of parchment in his hand as if it were worth more than the lives before him.

"In the name of the venerable Hanseatic League," he began, in a voice as artificial as the decoration on his coat of arms, "you, pirates and criminals, are guilty of robbery, murder, and shame. Your guilt is proven by your very existence; your life is forfeited by your actions. Therefore, the rope awaits you. Each of you will hang until your body is cold and your head is plundered by crows."

A murmur went through the prisoners. Some laughed, screamed, and spat. One roared: "Then hang us, you swine! We've been dancing in the wind longer than you'll ever live!" A Hanseatic man stepped forward and slapped him bloody in the mouth, but he was still laughing.

Another wept, sank to his knees, murmuring prayers. Next to him squatted a man grinning and humming a sea shanty as if he were already halfway to heaven or hell.

The one-eyed man raised his head, blood plastered to his face, but his smile was broad. "Do you hear it?" he cried, "they've already counted the ropes as if we were cattle. But do you know what they've forgotten? We are more than cattle. We are ghosts. If we hang, you hang too—in your dreams, in your nights. You'll never be rid of us."

The Hanseatic men struck him down, but his words cut deeper than any blow from a stick.

The boy heard the announcement, and despite the sun, he felt cold. He felt the chains on his hands, burning like fire. He saw the men's faces—desperate, defiant, insane. And he understood: their freedom was over. All that remained was the price. And the price was the rope.

The Hanseatic League banners fluttered in the wind, and for a moment they sounded like gallows ropes that had already been drawn.

The chains rattled as they were pushed one by one down the narrow hatch. The stench greeted them: mold, piss, old blood. There was no room below, just a hole in the belly of the cog, damp, black, and clammy as a grave.

The men were thrown in like sacks. Some fell on their backs, others on their knees, the iron cutting into skin and bone. Anyone who didn't get up quickly enough received a shove from above until they lay gasping among the others.

It was dark. Only a few cracks in the wood let in thin slivers of light. And there was a rustling in the darkness – rats, already waiting for them, curious, hungry.

The pirates lay side by side, close together, panting. One immediately began to sing, softly, a disjointed song about the gallows. Another hit him on the forehead because he didn't want to hear the song. They both laughed, bloody, madly.

Some wept, others cursed, still others prayed. A few simply stared into the darkness, as if they could already see the noose.

The one-eyed man sat in the shadows, his eyes glittering, and his voice was cold. "You see," he whispered, "down here you're already dead. The ship is your coffin. The rope is just the lid." No one answered, but everyone heard, and the words burned in the darkness.

The boy lay with his back against the wet wood, his hands sore from the shackles, his ribs aching. He heard the men breathing, heard the rats scratching. He knew: the freedom they had taken for themselves was long dead down here. The rope was merely a formality.

The ship creaked above them, and even that creak sounded like a gallows that was already moving.

The night down there was endless. No stars, no moon, only the dripping of water, the rattling of chains, and the scratching of rats. Some men were still laughing, a hoarse, broken laugh that sounded like a curse in the darkness. Others talked in their sleep, whispering the names of whores, of mothers, of gods who never came.

One began to gnaw the chain around his neck until his teeth splintered. Another sang incessantly until his voice failed and only a wheezing sound remained. Two argued, cursed each other, butted heads together until one lay motionless. No one pulled him away. He simply lay between them, and the rats came to him faster than prayer.

The one-eyed man sat in the shadows, his eye like a glowing splinter. He whispered softly, words no one fully understood, but everyone felt. "You are already legends," he murmured. "The Hanseatic League will hang you, but in their nights they themselves hang. You continue to dance in their heads." Some laughed, others remained silent. But everyone heard.

Bone Man remained missing. Sometimes the men thought they heard his heavy breathing, deep, somewhere in the darkness. Others swore they saw a silhouette, tall, broad-shouldered, motionless. But when the light fell through a crack, there was only wood. Perhaps he was already part of the sea. Perhaps he was just waiting silently for the rope.

The boy lay still, his hands sore, his head heavy. He saw the men crumble before the noose even touched them. Freedom had been nothing but a dream that had awakened them in chains. The price for it wasn't just death—it was the memory that remained. A memory the gentlemen called "pirates." Monsters.

The ship creaked, the waves slapped against the hull. And in the darkness, it sounded as if the gallows were already practicing its song.

Betrayal in the cabin

It was night, or day—in the belly of the ship, it was all one and the same. Only the dripping of water and the gnawing of rats suggested that time was still crawling along. Then they heard footsteps above them, heavy, slow, and the hatch opened. Light flooded into the dungeon, bright, painful.

"You. Come with me."

A Hanseatic man pointed with a pike at one of the prisoners. A skinny fellow, with a wisp of beard and eyes as wide as a child's. He didn't move. Two men grabbed him, pulled him up by the chains, and pushed him up the steps. The hatch slammed shut, leaving darkness behind.

Voices could be heard above. First quietly, then louder. A command, a reply, a whimper. Then the dull sound of blows. The creaking of the cabin, a chair tipping over. More voices. Some of the prisoners held their breath, others laughed, a sick, short laugh.

"They've pried his mouth open," one murmured. "Now he'll spit whether he wants to or not." "Or he'll keep quiet and die faster," another said. But his voice trembled.

Minutes stretched on. Then footsteps returned. The hatch opened, the light cutting through again. The man was thrown back. He fell hard onto the planks, gasping, his face smeared with blood. No one asked him anything. He just stared at the ceiling, motionless, his eyes open but empty.

The men around him moved away. Not because he stank, not because he was bleeding—but because everyone knew: Something was broken. In him, and perhaps in everyone.

The one-eyed man laughed quietly in the darkness. "That's how it starts," he whispered. "One spits, and soon they'll eat you all."

The boy saw the man lying there, heard the creaking of his chains as he breathed. And he understood: betrayal had opened the hatch—and it wouldn't close again anytime soon.

The planks above them creaked as if they themselves were listening.

The footsteps came again, heavy, purposeful. The hatch creaked, light cutting into the darkness. "You," said the Hanseatic, and this time he nodded at a broad-shouldered pirate, one who had always laughed loudly on deck. Now he wasn't grinning. He never grinned again.

They dragged him up, chains rattled, boots trampled. The hatch slammed shut. Darkness, again. But this time, it wasn't just blows that were heard.

It began with yelling. Orders, threats. Then a loud, hoarse answer. "Klaus! I tell you, Klaus was a fool! His crown is rusting in the sea! I was never with him, I swear!" Then more blows, a crash, and he continued yelling. "The treasures—in the dunes near Heligoland! Ask the others, they know too!"

The prisoners below held their breath. His voice pierced the beams, each word a dagger. Some growled, others stared into space, still others shook their heads. But everyone heard.

"The traitor sings," hissed one, "like a rooster before slaughter." "Let him sing," whispered another, "it won't change anything. We'll all hang."

There was another crash up above. The man screamed, howled, and laughed. "I'll give you names! I'll give you anything you want!" His voice broke, turned into a whimper. Then silence. Only the creaking of the cabin.

When he was pushed back, he lay on the planks like a sack. But his gaze was no longer directed at the others. He stared into space, his mouth half-open, as if he still wanted to speak. No one approached, no one spat. They moved away from him as if from a corpse still breathing.

The one-eyed man laughed deeply and darkly. "See? First one, then two. Soon you'll all be chattering. The rope doesn't need you at all—you'll hang yourselves."

The boy saw the men staring at the traitor. Some filled with hatred, others with fear. And he understood: The chains held them together—but their tongues would separate them.

The ship creaked as if it were carrying the confession itself.

The silence in the belly of the ship was heavy as lead. Everyone could still hear the echo of the traitor's voice, which had betrayed everything above. Some growled, others whispered curses, and the air stank of fear and sweat.

Then a rustling sound. One of the prisoners, a rough-looking fellow with torn lips, slid closer to the talkative man, who now lay in the darkness, panting, his eyes empty. "You sold us out," he hissed, barely audibly, "you're worse than the rope."

The clang of chains. Suddenly, he wrapped his iron around the traitor's neck and pulled tight. A gasp, a rattle, a kicking. The others saw only shadows, heard

the choking, the clattering, the scraping on the planks. Some cheered quietly, others held their breath.

"Leave him alone!" whispered one, "he'll die soon anyway." "No," growled another, "traitors die twice."

The strangler pulled harder, the iron cutting deep into his flesh. The traitor struggled, whimpered, tried to scream, but only a gurgling wheeze came out. He lashed out, but the chains held him, the men around him held him tight, until he fell silent.

Silence. Only the dripping of water.

Then someone laughed, quietly, hoarsely. A laugh without joy. Others joined in, a crooked, broken laughter that filled the dungeon.

The one-eyed man grinned in the shadows, his eye glittering. "Very good," he whispered. "You'll hang each other before the gallows touch you. Save the gentlemen work."

The boy saw the dead body, the tongue swollen, the eyes open, the chains still around the neck. And he understood: betrayal was worse than any bullet. Betrayal made them executioners themselves.

The ship groaned as if it had overheard the murder – and kept the secret in the wood.

The hatch opened again, the light cutting into the stinking belly like a knife. "You!" A Hanseatic man pointed, and this time it hit an old pirate, a gray face, scars across both cheeks, a man who had already drunk more rum than a village had ever seen.

They pulled him up, the chains rattled, and darkness closed over the others again. Up above, they heard blows, orders, curses—but no answer. No words, no whimpering. Only the dull crash, the crack as wooden chairs broke or fists struck flesh.

The minutes dragged on. Then came a scream, short, harsh. After that, silence. No more voices, no more pleading. Only the pounding of boots, the cracking of iron.

When they threw him back, he was more blood than man. He didn't crawl, he just lay there, his chains heavy, his breath rattling. But his eyes were clear. Not a word came from his lips—not for the Hanseatic League, not for his own men.

The prisoners looked at him. One whispered, "He kept silent." Another growled, "And what good does it do him? He hangs like us." But there was something like respect in their eyes, a reminder that silence was sometimes worth more than a hundred words.

The one-eyed man laughed coldly. "You see? One betrays, one remains silent. And both lie in the dirt. The game has no winners." His voice crept through the darkness like poison.

The boy stared at the old pirate lying in the shadows, bleeding but with clear eyes. He understood: speaking cost the soul, silence cost the flesh. Both led to the rope.

The ship creaked as if it were nodding itself: the price was always the same.

The darkness reeked of fear. Not a word was spoken, but the air was filled with thoughts that weighed heavier than iron. Everyone heard each other's breathing, the scraping of chains, the creaking of joints. And everyone wondered:*Which of us will speak next?*

Glances glittered in the dim light, hostile, cold. Men who had been brothers in the rum yesterday now eyed each other like enemies. One retreated into the corner as if trying to become invisible. Two others moved close together, whispering, until one of them snapped: "You're plotting? You'll be the next to sing!" A growl, a jerk of chains, almost a brawl, until the irons forced them back to the ground.

One betrayal was enough to tear all ties apart. No one trusted anyone anymore. Not the strong, not the weak, not even the mute. Everyone was suspect. Everyone was a potential dog, ready to open their mouth if the blows were hard enough.

"We're hanging anyway," one whispered. "Why not talk?" Immediately, a chain hit him in the ribs. "Shut up, rat!" Blood was running from his mouth, but he was laughing—a crazy, quiet chuckle.

The one-eyed man grinned in the darkness. "Very good," he murmured. "Just look at you. You're already hanging on to each other with your eyes. Soon there

won't be any need for a rope anymore." His eyes sparkled, his laughter was quieter than the drops, but it crept into everyone's ears.

The boy felt it like a cold hand on his neck: These were no longer brothers. They were rats, locked in the same cage, eating each other before the executioner opened the door.

The ship groaned, and in its creaking lay the echo of the chains – as if to say: “You were hanged long ago.”

The darkness lay heavy as wet sand. Hardly anyone was speaking anymore; only the dripping of water and the gnawing of rats filled the silence. Then suddenly—a voice. Shrill, panicked.

"I know more! Get me up! I'll give you names! I'll give you everything!"

The words echoed against the planks, sinking into the men's bones. Immediately, chains rattled, curses, and screams. "Shut up, rat!" - "Let him sing, he'll die anyway!" - "If they take him, they'll take us all!" The darkness came alive, teeth bared, chains snapped, hands grabbed.

The traitor continued to roar, louder, as if trying to break through the wood. "Hear me! Klaus, the treasures, the names! I'll tell you everything!" His voice cracked, full of fear, full of greed.

Then someone grabbed him in the darkness. A fist, a chain, a bite. Screams, choking, the thud of bodies rolling across the planks. Other men laughed, roared, and screamed, as if it were another dance, this time in the dungeon. Blood spurted, warm, invisible, but the smell spread.

Then silence. Only wheezing, sobbing, the dripping of blood on wood. The traitor lay still, his chest still, his mouth half-open, as if he still wanted to speak – but no more sound came.

The one-eyed man laughed softly, a dark, cold laugh that crawled over everyone's skin. "Very beautiful," he whispered. "Your last dance—betrayal against betrayal. If you hang, you're already hanging."

The boy pressed his back against the wall, his eyes wide. He realized: This was worse than the gallows. It wasn't the rope that killed them, but what they did to each other in the dark. Betrayal was their final dance—and neither survived.

Above them, the ship creaked as if it were listening. Its sound was like a gallows already tightening its rope.

The last orgy

The hatch burst open, light burst into the darkness, and laughter echoed from above. "Here, you swine! A feast fit for the gallows!" Two Hanseatic men tipped a barrel down, it splashed onto the planks, the lid popped off—the smell of cheap beer mingled with the mustiness of the cell. Shortly afterward, loaves of bread, hard as stones, and a piece of meat, greenish around the edges, as if it had already seen three summers too many, flew out.

The pirates stared for a second – then chaos erupted. They pounced on the keg, on each other, on everything that dripped and stank. Chains rattled, teeth gritted, hands ripped. One dove his head straight into the beer, drinking like an animal, while two others grabbed him by the hair and pounded on him with their fists until he recoiled, gasping.

The bread shattered into shreds, teeth broke on it, one swallowed so quickly that he gagged and vomited, only to reach for it again. The meat—if it was still that—was torn through hands like treasure, one bit into it, grinning with a bloody mouth, while another choked him from behind, only to tear it off himself.

The Hanseatic men above roar. "Look at them! Royal dogs, aren't they?" They spit down, laughed, and bet on who will die first.

The one-eyed man sat in the shadows, his eye glittering like a shard of glass. He laughed deeply. "Yes, eat, drink. That's what freedom looks like—the last meal, served by your executioners." His voice cut through the jeering, and some laughed louder, others swallowed silently, but no one stopped listening.

The boy pressed himself into the corner, watched the men stagger, chew, drink, vomit, and hit. He smelled the stench, heard the laughter from above, and realized: This was no mercy. This was the prelude to the rope. They wanted to see her dance once more, with full bellies and empty dignity.

The ship creaked as if it itself were clapping in time to the festival of the dead.

The barrel was half empty, but the intoxication was full. Men staggered in the narrow hole, the chains clinking like glasses, and every blow against the iron bars was a toast. One sang a brothel song in a broken voice, so off-key that even the rats stopped. Two others bellowed the chorus, laughing and fighting each other until both lay bleeding on the ground, still laughing.

One found a piece of bread in the dirt, bit into it, choked, immediately vomited it up, and tried to pick up the pile of vomit again. The others roared with laughter, one kicked him in the face, and the laughter grew louder.

The meat had long since disappeared, in stomachs or on the ground, but the men shouted that they had more and snatched the remains from each other's hands. Blood, beer, vomit—everything smelled the same, everything tasted the same, and they smacked their lips and roared as if it were a feast.

At the top of the hatch, the Hanseatic men clapped, spat down, shouted: “This is what your kingdom looks like, dogs!” and laughed as if they were watching a play.

The one-eyed man sat in the shadows, grinning like a master of ceremonies. "Yes," he murmured, "drink, eat, laugh. Every sip is another nail in the coffin of your dignity. But what does it matter? Tomorrow you'll hang. So eat the shame today."

A few pirates heard him and laughed even louder. One shouted, "To the king!" and raised his mug, a piece of wood covered in dirt and beer residue. He tipped it down, fell over, and lay there gasping for breath. No one looked after him.

The boy stood with his back against the wall, his eyes wide open. He saw men who had been feared devils yesterday, now wallowing in the dirt, vomiting, laughing, as if they wanted to drink death away before it took them. And he understood: This wasn't an orgy of life—it was the orgy of the end.

The planks above them creaked as if even the beams were laughing at the dogs' performance.

One of the men suddenly stood up, staggering, the chains rattling against his legs. He grinned broadly, his teeth bloody, his eyes glazed over from drunkenness. "Look, brothers!" he cried, "I'm dancing for the gallows!" Then he began to hop in a circle, his arms raised, the chains beating like drums. Blood oozed from a wound in his stomach, but he laughed, spat, and continued dancing.

The men roared, stamped, and slapped their iron against the planks, a hellish rhythm. The dancer sped up, staggered, stumbled—and fell forward. His head hit the floor, cracking, and he fell silent. The laughter swelled, as if he'd told the best joke a pirate had ever told.

Another grabbed a piece of bread, choked on it, wheezed, his eyes bulged. Two patted him on the back, laughed, and shouted, "Drink more slowly, dog!" He choked, fell over, the foam in his mouth white as the sail of the cog, and died laughing.

The beer ran over the planks, mingling with blood, urine, and vomit. Some lay in it, sipping it as if it were rum. Others continued to fight, with fists, chains, and teeth, each blow accompanied by laughter.

The Hanseatic men above clapped, roared, spat, one shouted: “Tomorrow they hang, today they dance!” and the laughter echoed throughout the ship.

The one-eyed man grinned, his eye sparkling. "Yes, brothers, that's how you die: with vomit in your beard and laughter in your mouth. You are legends—but only in shame." His voice was like poison, but the men only heard half of it. They laughed louder, as if they wanted to swallow themselves.

The boy stood silently in the corner, his hands around his knees, his stomach empty and filled with disgust. He saw men dying while laughing, making themselves into clowns for their executioners. And he understood: This was no longer an orgy. It was the end of humanity.

The ship creaked deeply, as if it were bending under the weight of madness.

The yelling grew louder, the fists harder. Laughter turned to screaming, drinking turned to hitting. One man grabbed the other by the neck, bit his ear, and ripped out a piece of flesh. The bitten man screamed, lashed out with his forehead, and both staggered, bloody, laughing, and screaming, until they lay motionless in the dirt.

Another stabbed a piece of bread like a dagger into the eye of his neighbor, who screamed and blindly fought back. Blood spurted, the bread stuck, and both of them rolled on the ground while the others cheered them on as if it were a game.

Iron chains became weapons, snapping, tearing skin, shattering teeth. Everyone was an enemy, everyone a victim, everyone an executioner. Men

laughed, even when they were bleeding; one shouted, "I'd rather die drunk than on a rope!" and immediately had his throat ripped open.

Up at the hatch, the Hanseatic men cheered. "Look at them! They're already hanging themselves!" One spat down, another tossed a coin after them, as if it were a competition.

The one-eyed man grinned broadly, his eyes sparkling. "Very good," he said quietly, as if he were the master of this theater. "Eat yourselves, fight yourselves, die like pigs. Tomorrow no one will laugh, so laugh yourselves to death today." His voice was drowned out by the noise, but it hung in people's heads like smoke.

The boy pressed himself deeper into the corner, his knees to his chest, his face in shadow. He could no longer distinguish who was alive and who was dying, who was laughing and who was screaming. Everything sounded the same, everything smelled the same—blood, vomit, beer, fear. And he realized: The last orgy was nothing more than a mass grave in the belly of the ship.

The planks trembled as if they themselves were dancing under the men's blows, and the creaking sounded like the groaning of a gallows that was already bearing too much weight.

The cheering slowly died down. The drinking was over, the blood on the planks still steamed. Bodies lay on top of each other like logs, some twitching, some silent. The stench was unbearable: vomit, shit, beer, blood—a single mess in which they knelt, sat, and lay.

Those who were still breathing were gasping. No one had the strength to sing anymore. One leaned in the shadows, laughing weakly until he choked and suffocated in his own vomit. Another sang one last song, so quietly that you could only hear it if you were lying right next to him—it ended in the middle of a verse.

Up at the hatch, it had become quieter. Even the Hanseatic men had seen enough. One spat down and muttered: "Tomorrow they'll hang, today they're already dead." Then the hatch slammed shut, and only darkness remained.

The one-eyed man was still grinning, his eyes sparkling in the dim light. "That's it, brothers. Your last orgy. Tomorrow you'll be nothing but meat on a rope." His voice was cold, almost tender, like a priest reciting his last prayer—except his words were poisonous.

The survivors stared at him, some with hatred, others with empty eyes. But no one spoke. They were broken, empty, already half-corpses.

The boy sat in his corner, his arms around his knees, his head heavy. He could still hear the echo of the laughter, the screams, the choking. He saw the dead, still warm, and the living, already cold. He knew: This hadn't been a celebration. It was a slaughter. A slaughter in which they themselves had taken a hand.

The planks above them groaned, and the creaking sounded as if the ship itself were applauding the dead.

The laughter was dead. The roaring was dead. Everything was silent in the belly of the ship. Only the dripping of water, the scratching of rats, and the clanking of chains as someone twitched in their sleep.

The few who were still breathing lay scattered among the corpses. Some were snoring, drunk, their mouths open, beer and blood in their beards. Others dozed with their eyes open, half awake, half already near the dead. One whispered incomprehensibly, a prayer perhaps, or just a song without a melody.

Above, everything was quiet. No more jeering, no more mockery. The Hanseatics had had their show, and now they left the dogs to rot in their own stench. The ship creaked softly, as if breathing heavily, tired from the spectacle.

The one-eyed man sat in the shadows, his back against the wall, the chains loosely around his knees. His eye still sparkled, and he grinned. "That's it," he murmured. "Your last laugh. Tomorrow you hang. Today you're already dead." He spoke it quietly, but everyone heard, even the semi-conscious.

The boy lay on the planks, his arms wrapped around his chest, his head against the wet wood. He felt the darkness tighten around him like a rope. He knew: This was the last night. No more waking, no more morning in his life. Only the gallows, the crowd, the mocking song.

And in the darkness he heard another laugh – not from the men, not from above, but from deep within the ship, from the sea itself. A laugh that said:*You danced, you drank, you died – and tomorrow you'll be even more beautiful.*

The darkness remained. The last orgy was over. The gallows already awaited.

The cannons speak louder

The first thunder came in the morning. A dull thud that ripped through the planks like a punch to the stomach. The prisoners in the dungeon flinched, the chains rattled, one cried out briefly as if the bullet had hit him himself.

Above, men cheered. Glasses clinked, voices roared. Another blow, louder, deeper. The entire ship shook, dust trickled from the beams. Again the prisoners twitched, again the rattling of the iron.

"What is that?" one whispered, his eyes wide. Another laughed bitterly: "Those are our bells, dog. They're ringing us to death."

The Hanseatic sailors on deck sang, toasted, and shouted verses about the "last voyage of the dogs." Every cannon shot wasn't an attack—it was a toast. A clap of thunder to mark victory over the pirates in the air.

Down below, it was different. Every bang made the planks vibrate, each one echoed like a heartbeat in the darkness. One man began to cry, another roared over the roar, screaming curses, yelling so loudly his voice broke. No one heard him—except the rats.

The one-eyed man grinned, his eyes sparkling in the twilight. "Do you hear?" he whispered. "They fire cannons because they're afraid of us. Even dead, we must be drowned out. They fear that our ghosts will laugh louder than their bells roar."

Some nodded, some laughed frantically, others covered their ears. But the roar kept coming, blow after blow, louder than any words.

The boy sat still, his hands over his ears, but it was no use. Every shot pierced his bones, each echoed in his chest. He knew: This was no longer a war. This was a celebration. A celebration over their graves.

The planks trembled and the ship groaned as if it knew itself that the thunder was no longer silent.

The cannons continued to fire, shot after shot. Each blast shook the ship, each one echoed in the belly of the dungeon like a whiplash. Above, the Hanseatic men roared, clinked glasses, and sang filthy songs about pirates dangling from ropes.

"To the dogs of the sea!" one yelled, and the next shot followed like a toast. Laughter, applause, singing.

Below, the pirates raised their heads. One began to roar above the thunder, a hoarse howl filled with hatred: "We'll dance on the rope, but we'll drink you dry!" Others joined in, screaming, singing, and hollering. Not a song, just a chaos of voices, wild, off-key, hoarse—but it was their resistance.

Every cannon shot was met with a scream. "Listen, you dogs!" one roared, "we'll sound louder, even if we die!" He wheezed, laughed, and the others laughed along.

The one-eyed man laughed the loudest. His eyes sparkled, and he shouted between the cannon shots: "Every thunder is our song! They think they're celebrating victory—but they're playing our music!" He laughed like a madman, and some believed it, shouting in time as if they were commanding the cannons themselves.

The boy pressed his back against the planks, feeling the roar in his bones. It was madness, he knew it—and yet he understood why the men were roaring. It was the last thing they had left: a song of their own, bellowed against the thunder, even if no one heard it.

The ship continued to vibrate, shot after shot. And for a moment, it sounded as if the sea itself were playing drums—for a celebration no pirate would survive.

Suddenly, not just one shot came—it was a whole salvo. Three, four, five cannons thundered almost simultaneously. The ship shook as if a giant were grabbing it with both fists and shaking it. Dust trickled from the beams, splinters blew from the planks, a piece of wood crashed from the ceiling, right into the prisoners.

Some screamed, others laughed. One grabbed the splinter, held it high like a flag, and yelled, "Look! Even the ship is fighting with us!" He swung the wood until he was knocked over by the chain of a man next to him.

The Hanseatic League men above cheered, the clinking of their cups tinged with the thunder. "For the Hanseatic League! For victory!" they shouted, and another volley followed. Again everything shook, the planks groaned, the wood creaked, and a crack opened in the dungeon ceiling.

A beam of light fell through the crack, bright, strange, as if the sea itself had briefly glimpsed hell. A few men craned their necks, saw the light, and

screamed like demons. "The sea hears us! It sees us!" One laughed, one cried, one yelled prayers as if this were the last mass.

The one-eyed man grinned, his eye gleaming in the beam of light. "Yes! The sea is laughing! It's laughing at us all! And the cannons are just the baton!" His voice echoed louder than the others', and some believed him, roaring along as if the gap were a sign.

The boy stared at the light, holding his breath. For a moment, it seemed as if the sea were actually listening—as if it were hearing their confused song, screaming against the thunder. But the crack closed again, the wood splintered, and only darkness remained.

Then another shot, louder than the previous ones. The ground vibrated, and the light disappeared. Only smoke and dust remained.

The ship creaked, and the creaking sounded like a tired laugh:*You think the sea can hear you? It only hears your end.*

The thunder died down, but it didn't quiet down. Horns, drums, and fanfares sounded across the deck, as if the Hanseatic dogs themselves had begun a feast fit for kings. Voices sang, bellowed hymns to the cities, to trade, to the "just punishment for the pirate pack." Every note was a mockery that crept through the planks like acid.

The prisoners below sat exhausted, panting, their throats sore from screaming. They had roared against the thunder, but their voices were broken, hoarse, reduced to croaks and coughs. The beer from the last meal still hung in their stomachs, sour and rotten, and every breath tasted of decay.

One began to sing softly, an old song that used to echo across the planks during storms. But his voice broke after two lines, and he fell back into silence. Another laughed, but it was a dry, short laugh that was immediately stifled.

The one-eyed man didn't laugh. He spoke softly, almost reverently, as if delivering a sermon: "Listen, brothers. They celebrate their victory. But their songs are hollow. They know we had more freedom in the filth than they did in their halls. That's why they blow horns—to stifle their fear." Some listened, others remained silent, no one objected.

The boy crouched in the shadows, his arms wrapped around his legs. He heard the drums, the horns, the laughter from above. It sounded like a mass—but a

mass for their death. He sensed that the celebration above them was louder than any life down here.

And he understood: Freedom had been loud, but the victory of their enemies was louder. Loud songs, loud cannons, loud laughter. Everything louder than their voices.

The ship creaked, and in its sound there was a faint echo: not of jubilation, not of victory – but of death.

With the darkness, the horns, the laughter, even the cannons fell silent. Only the sea remained, gently lapping against the hull, steady, indifferent. But it was precisely this silence that weighed more heavily than any thunder.

The pirates in the dungeon held their breath. Some had thought they would find peace after the roar, but the silence was worse. It left room for thoughts, for images of the gallows, for the face of the executioner that everyone already saw in their imagination.

One began to whimper, quietly, almost childishly. Another hit the wall with his chains, repeatedly, as if trying to break the silence. After a few blows, he collapsed, gasping, powerless.

"Do you hear it?" whispered the one-eyed man. "The silence is louder than the cannons. Because it's creeping into your skulls. Because now you only hear yourselves." His eyes flashed, and some fell silent even harder, others began to murmur, as if they had to fill the hole in the silence.

The boy lay awake, his eyes wide open. He heard the sea lapping steadily against the wood. It was a calm, almost gentle sound—but to him, it sounded like the rocking of a gallows, already waiting expectantly for them.

And he understood: The thunder had at least kept them busy, had made them scream. But the silence had drowned them—even before the sea took them, even before the rope pulled them.

Above them fluttered the banners of the Hanseatic League, but below in the darkness only their thoughts fluttered, like bats that do not disappear from their heads.

The ship groaned softly, and the groan sounded as if it were sighing:*Tomorrow everything ends.*

Morning came not with light, but with thunder. Even before the sun broke through the fog, the cannons boomed again, a final salute from the Hanseatic League. The salvo rolled across the sea, deep, harsh, like the drums before an execution.

The pirates in the dungeon shuddered, even those who were already half-dead. Chains rattled, one prayed, one screamed, one laughed. But no one could escape the echo. Every shot sounded as if it were ripping directly through their skulls, each one echoed like the click of a gallows being prepared.

Above, the Hanseatic League cheered, sang, and clinked glasses. "For victory!" echoed across the planks. And everyone knew: They weren't just celebrating the victory—they were celebrating the dead already in prison, and those yet to dangle.

The one-eyed man grinned, his eyes sparkling in the twilight. "There you have it, brothers," he whispered, "the cannons are the bells of your funeral. And the Hanseatic League is the priest who will preach you into your prison." Some laughed hysterically, others stared at him, silent, full of hatred or fear.

The boy sat still, his hands wrapped around his knees. He heard the thunder, heard the yelling. And he understood: the sea no longer spoke for them. Freedom had fallen silent. All that spoke now were the cannons—and tomorrow the rope would speak.

The sun broke through the clouds, pale and cold. Banners fluttered above the deck, and below in the ship's belly there was only silence, heavier than iron.

The ship creaked, and the creak sounded like a sigh:*The song is sung.*

The end begins with a scream

The sun hung pale in the sky as the hatch was flung open. "Out, dogs!" a voice roared, and the Hanseatic men shoved the prisoners up the steps. Chains rattled, bodies stumbled, one fell to his knees and immediately received a kick in the back that made him howl.

For the first time in weeks, they saw the sky again. A sky that hung indifferently above them, blue and vast—as if it knew nothing of gallows and ropes. The

men blinked into the light, their eyes red, their flesh raw. The stench of the dungeon still clung to them, and the air of the harbor offered no relief.

For the crowd was waiting on the quay. Hundreds, perhaps thousands. Men with beer mugs, women with baskets, children on their fathers' shoulders. Everyone gawked, laughed, and shouted. Merchants shouted prices for fresh bread and beer as if it were a fair. "Come, come! Look at the pirates! Soon they'll be dancing on the rope!"

The prisoners were driven across the planks, one after the other, chained together. Some held their heads high, as high as the irons allowed. Others slumped, staggering, looking only at their feet. One prayed quietly, his lips bloody.

Spit flew from the crowd, slapping faces and hair. Curses echoed, stones flew. One of the pirates roared back, spat on the spectators, and was struck down with a club across the head. Blood streamed down his face, and the crowd cheered as if they themselves had struck the blow.

The one-eyed man grinned, even with blood in his beard. He spat right at a child's feet, looked at the mother, and growled: "You'd better take him home. Otherwise, he'll eat the rope faster than we will." The crowd screamed in rage, but the one-eyed man's grin only grew wider.

The boy staggered behind, the chains heavy, his eyes wide. He heard the screams, saw the faces – hatred, greed, curiosity. It wasn't a courtroom, it was a theater. And they, the men of the sea, were the main attraction.

The land smelled of sweat, dirt and straw – and of rope.

The chains rattled across the pavement as the Hanseatic men drove the prisoners through the narrow streets. Houses lined the left and right like spectators in an arena. Faces hung from windows, women shouted curses, children threw rotten apples. One hit the boy in the temple. He staggered, but the chain dragged him on.

Beer mugs flew, spit dripped from above. "There they are! The devils of the sea!" someone shouted. "Now they're hanging like the pigs they are!" Laughter, jeers, a few voices sang malicious songs in which the pirates' names had long since become curses.

One of the prisoners, a broad-shouldered man with a battered face, jerked his head up. Defiance burned in his eyes. "You cowardly dogs!" he roared, "We

taught you fear, we took your gold, your women, your peace! And we..." He got no further. A club crashed onto his back, then onto his head. He screamed—a short, high-pitched scream, raw, piercing to the bone.

And the crowd cheered. Children clapped, women laughed, men clinked glasses. His scream was the prelude. The end began not with a gallows, but with this scream, echoing in all throats like a fanfare.

Some pirates laughed defiantly, others bowed their heads. One howled loudly, another spat blood onto the cobblestones. But the scream remained in the air, still vibrating in the stones, in the wood of the houses, in the chains on their wrists.

The one-eyed man grinned, blood on his teeth. "There you go," he growled, "the end has been sung. And tomorrow we'll all scream in unison."

The boy staggered on, hearing the cheers of the crowd, the scream of his comrade, the clang of the irons. And he knew: the end wasn't the gallows. The end was already here, in every alley, in every voice, in that first scream.

The country itself seemed to roar along.

The streets widened, and with every step the crowd grew. It was as if all the demons of the city had heard the call: merchants abandoned their stalls, women dragged their children, old men limped forward—everyone wanted to see the dogs of the sea broken.

The procession of pirates wound through the alleys like a filthy snake. Chains rattled, boots thumped, spit and curses rained down. Some men in the crowd laughed, others tossed coins as if it were a contest to see how long one could stay upright before breaking.

The one-eyed man roared back, grinned, and spat. "See, you fools! You need us to feel alive!" His voice was drowned out by the jeers, but his smile remained like a scar on the faces staring at him.

Some of the pirates walked upright, proud, still in the dirt. Others dragged their feet, their faces gray, their lips muttering prayers no one wanted to hear. One laughed hysterically, repeatedly, a senseless laugh, until he collapsed and was dragged along by two soldiers.

The crowd swelled like a flood. The square in front of them filled with faces, voices, and hands reaching out for them. Beer flowed freely, and the cheering became a single roar, as if they had brought thunder itself to the land.

The boy staggered along, his hands sore from the irons. He saw the crowd, felt the heat of their bodies, smelled the sweat, the beer, the greed. It wasn't a people—it was a monster with a thousand throats, just waiting for their blood.

And he understood: The sea had swallowed them, but the land would tear them apart. Every step on this pavement was harder than the storms they had ever endured.

The land cried out. And they were the prey.

The procession burst out of the narrow streets, and suddenly the square lay before them. Wide, open, a stone basin filled with people. Perhaps thousands. They stood shoulder to shoulder, pushing, shouting, throwing up their arms. The air was thick with sweat, beer, and anticipation.

And there, in the middle of the square, stood the gallows. Not one, not two—a whole row. Wooden beams, black with tar, thick ropes hung down like the ropes of a ship. They fluttered in the wind, each rope a unique flag of death.

A roar rippled through the crowd as the pirates were driven into the square. Children were lifted up for a better view. Merchants continued to shout their wares: bread, fish, beer—the execution was a market.

The Hanseatics laughed and pushed their prisoners forward. One stumbled, fell to his knees, and immediately a boot slammed into his back. The crowd cheered as if it were a game.

The one-eyed man saw the gallows and laughed coldly. "Ha! There they are, the new masts! Only without sails. We're sailing to the afterlife now, brothers." His voice echoed, and a few pirates joined in the mad laughter, while the others bowed their heads.

The sun was high, burning hot, making the ropes gleam like golden snakes. They waited, patiently, silently. But the crowd raged like the sea in a storm, everyone wanting to see the first twitch, the first neck to break.

The boy stared at the gallows, the row of ropes. He no longer heard the crowd, felt only the heat on his skin, the weight of the chains. He realized: This was

their port. This was where the journey ended. No sea, no freedom—just wood, rope, and a square full of greedy eyes.

And the gallows stood there as if they had always been waiting for them.

The Hanseatic League drove the pirates in groups to the scaffolding. Wooden stairs creaked, ropes swung in the wind. The crowd surged forward, children climbed onto shoulders, women shrieked, men screamed as if they were at a fairground game.

The first pirate, a broad man with tattooed arms, was seized, his hands tied behind his back, and the rope around his neck. He was still laughing, laughing so loudly that the crowd almost drowned him out. "Do you hear that, you pigs? I'll laugh in your face!" But when the plank beneath him gave way, when the rope tightened, the laughter was stifled in a single scream.

A scream echoed through the square, through the windows, through the streets. Children covered their ears, women screamed louder, men cheered. And everyone shouted: "One more! One more!"

The second was brought immediately. He cried, begged, and screamed until he kicked, thrashed, and fell silent. The crowd cheered as if it were a game. The third laughed again, spat, and cursed the Hanseatic League—but he, too, screamed when the rope was pulled.

Every scream became a prelude to the next. It wasn't an end; it was a concert. A gruesome, loud concert of screams, laughter, and yelling.

The one-eyed man watched, grinning, his eye glittering. "Very good," he murmured, "the end has a voice. And it sounds louder than cannons."

The boy stood there, bound, the chains heavy, his knees weak. He heard the screams, saw the bodies writhing, saw the crowd roaring – and he knew: The end didn't begin with a silent sigh. It began with a scream that never ceased.

The square shook, and even the gallows creaked in time with the screams.

One rope after another tightened. Some screams were short, bright, breaking off like shattered glass. Others were shrill, drawn-out, until the air ran out and only a gasp remained. A few men didn't scream at all—they laughed, spat, cursed—but even their silence was swallowed up by the roar of the crowd.

The gallows creaked, the wood groaned, ropes buzzed. Bodies thrashed, kicked, and reared upright until they hung still. Every twitch, every jerk brought new cheers, new yells. Children clapped their hands as if it were a puppet show. Merchants sold beer as if the gallows were a play.

The screams merged into one another. One ended, the next began. It was no longer a chain, it was a chorus, a single scream that swept across the square like a storm. There was no first and no last scream—it was a cacophony, endless, a song of flesh, rope, and air that no one would forget.

The one-eyed man watched, grinning, his eyes sparkling. "Do you hear, brothers?" he cried. "That's our song! Louder than all the cannons, louder than all the drums! A song of screams—and they'll never get rid of it!" Even in the face of the rope, he roared louder, and some of the pirates laughed along, madly, desperately.

The boy stood there, his hands bound, his eyes wide. He saw the bodies wriggling, the tongues blue, the faces distorted. He heard the screams, the yelling, the creaking. And he knew: The end had no ending. It wasn't a single scream—it was an endless, greedy song that continued to echo even when the last voices had died away.

The sun burned, the ropes fluttered, the crowd roared. And above it all hung a choir made of throats, wood, and hatred.

The end began with a scream – and it didn’t stop.

Prisoners of their own legends

The bodies still dangled. Some twitched, their tongues blue, their eyes half-open. The wind caught the ropes, making them swing like bells. But the crowd had long since taken its eyes off the bodies. Now they were talking.

"Did you hear the first scream? So loud the stones shook!" "No, the second was worse, I swear, it split the sky!" "Nonsense, the third one laughed, I saw it, he laughed when the rope came for him!"

Children jumped, echoing the screams, contorting their faces grotesquely as if it were a game. Women giggled, telling each other how the dogs had begged.

Men patted themselves on the back, swearing they had stared at the dead themselves until their eyes had collapsed.

Merchants took advantage of the opportunity. They sold leftover bread, supposedly from the "pirate's last meal," and wood chips they claimed to have stolen from the gallows. Everyone wanted to take a piece of this history home as a souvenir.

And the Hanseatic men stood proudly before the gallows, chests puffed out, voices loud: "Look! This is how the terror of the sea ends! We have tamed the monsters, we have tamed the sea!" They spoke as if they had slain dragons, not hanged men.

But in the background, more quietly, other voices echoed: "I swear, Störtebeker is still alive. They hanged a doppelganger." - "No, he took another ten steps, with his head under his arm." - "The rope couldn't hold him, I saw it."

Thus, screams became stories, blood became legends. And the dead dangled beside them, silent, powerless, while their lives were continued by others.

The boy saw it, heard it, and realized: They were no longer free. Not even in death. Now they belonged to the tongues of the crowd, which transformed their bodies into words.

And words are ropes that last longer than hemp.

The Hanseatics lined up, their armor polished to a shine, banners fluttering in the wind. One, with a red face and a belly like a barrel, stepped forward. He raised his hand as if he were a priest presiding over a church service. The voices fell silent, children were shoved, women stopped.

"In the name of the venerable Hanseatic League," he began, his voice solemn, "behold the bodies of robbers, heretics, and murderers. They did not hang in vain. They hang so that you children may never again fall prey to the sea. So that you know that no thief, no traitor, no pirate will ever escape. This," he pointed to the bodies swaying in the wind, "is the law."

The crowd cheered, shouted, and sang. Men clinked glasses, women screamed, and children threw stones at the corpses that had already lost their senses.

Then someone laughed. Not up above, not in the crowd—down below, in the line of the still living. The one-eyed man. Blood clung to his face, but his eye sparkled like a splinter of steel.

"Law?" he cried, his voice rough but clear. "Your law is filth! You hang us because you're afraid. You want people to think we're monsters. But we were freer in one hour at sea, drunk, bloody, cursed—than you have been in your entire cowardly lives!"

The crowd roared, spat, and raged. One of the Hanseatic men stepped forward and hit him in the face with the butt of his rifle. Blood spurted, and the one-eyed man spat it back out and laughed. "Write it down, you dogs! Even on the rope we laugh in your face. Your songs, your laws, your fairy tales—all just ropes of words. But you know: We're hanging here, and yet it's you who can't sleep!"

The Hanseatic men dragged him forward, the crowd cheered, stones flew. But his laughter remained unbroken, cutting, mocking.

The boy heard it, saw the eye sparkle, and he understood: Even in death, the one-eyed man was not free. He had long since been imprisoned—imprisoned in the legends others built from his laughter.

And the legends held stronger than any chain.

The sun was still high, the bodies swayed in the wind, and the vendors were already beginning to resell the spectacle. A man with a crooked nose stood on a box and sang, half song, half shout:

"There he hung, the devil of the sea, screaming loudly, then it was over, but I stood close, I saw clearly, he was crying like a child!"

The crowd roared, clapped, and tossed coins at him. Women giggled, children shouted the rhymes as if they were sayings for a game.

Another offered small pieces of paper inscribed with scrawled words: "Ballad of the Fall of the Pirates." He swore he had written them himself, "while the dogs were dangling." People snatched the sheets from his hands as if they were relics.

Another was selling "real nails from the gallows"—rusty iron shards he'd picked up from somewhere. "Wear this on your belt, and you'll be safe from the ghosts of pirates!" he shouted. The coins clinked in his pouch, while the dead men still swayed in the wind above him.

And in between, children sang new rhymes about Störtebeker, about blood, about screams. Some claimed they had seen one of the hanged men still

laughing, others that he had prayed, and still others that he had "flown with the devil."

The truth rotted on the rope while the legends were already dancing in the streets.

The boy stumbled among the prisoners, head bowed, eyes wide. He heard the ballads, the songs, the jeers. And he knew: They were no longer men. They were stories, sold like bread, sung like songs, twisted like rags.

Imprisoned – this time not by iron, but by words.

Even as the ropes creaked, a new whisper began to creep through the crowd. No longer about the screams, no longer about the thrashing bodies—but about the one name that was greater than all: Störtebeker.

"I swear to God, he's not dead," said a man with a beer in his beard. "They only hanged a straw man." "Nonsense!" a woman snarled, "I saw it with my own eyes—he took another ten steps with the rope around his neck before the hangman brought him down." "No, no," cried a child, "my father says the devil himself took him; he flew over the harbor with black wings!"

Every voice made the story bigger, louder, wilder. One claimed Störtebecker's ship was still at sea, full of ghosts waiting for revenge. Another swore he had drunk with him the night before, in a harbor tavern.

The Hanseatic men grinned crookedly, some laughed, others grew restless. Because they knew: no matter how loudly their cannons had thundered, no matter how many ropes they had strung, the legend had already risen before the body was cold.

The one-eyed man, bloodied and chained, heard the whisper. He laughed hoarsely. "You see, dogs? You hang us, but you can't kill him. He lives on in your mouths. Störtebeker never dies—because you keep telling him."

The crowd raged, spat, screamed, but the words continued to creep through every alley, every ear.

The boy heard them too. And he understood: his captain was no longer a man of flesh and blood. He was now a ghost of words. Imprisoned—not by the Hanseatic League, not by the rope, but by the legends that hung over him like a second rope.

And this rope would never break.

As the sun set, the crowd slowly dispersed. The children were tired from screaming, the women from spitting, the men from drinking. But they didn't walk silently—they walked talking. Everyone carried a piece of history with them, and no one carried the same one.

"He screamed like a pig." - "No, he laughed until the very end." - "I saw him spit on the executioner." - "Nonsense, he begged on his knees."

The voices mingled, contradicted each other, but that didn't matter. Each new lie clothed the truth like a rag, until the body beneath was no longer visible.

The merchants packed up, but they too were still calling out. "Come back tomorrow! The bodies are still hanging, and I'll sing you a new song!" Some promised to capture the screams on paper for a few coins.

The corpses remained. They swayed in the wind, dark against the evening sky. Birds were already circling, the first crows were perched on beams, pecking at fingers still trembling in the last gust of wind.

The Hanseatics kept watch, but they laughed, drank, and told their own stories. Each blow they struck grew greater, more heroic, until they themselves sounded like legends—made entirely of lies.

The boy sat in the shadow of the gallows, the chains heavy on his arms. He saw the bodies, heard the voices of the city already echoing in the alleys. And he understood: The men weren't just hanged. They had been rewritten. They weren't hanging by ropes alone—they were hanging by words.

And these words would continue longer than the flesh could last.

The gallows creaked, and the creaking sounded as if they themselves were listening to their dead becoming stories.

Night fell over the place of execution. The people had gone home, the merchants had fallen silent, only scattered laughter echoed from the taverns. All that remained were the gallows, the ropes, the bodies—shadows in the moonlight.

The wind caught the ropes, made them swing, made them sing. A song without words, just creaking, groaning, the banging of wood against wood. The bodies moved in rhythm, like puppets performing one last dance.

Crows perched on the rafters, pecking, fluttering, fighting over meat. Their wings rustled, their beaks snapped. But that, too, was just a new verse, another sound in the song of the night.

The city slept, but not silently. In the taverns, men still spoke of the screams, women whispered stories, children sang rhymes they had invented themselves. Störtebeker lived on – in words, in songs, in fairy tales.

The boy lay in the shadows, the chains heavy, his eyes open. He heard the night, saw the bodies in the moonlight, and he understood: This was not the end. It was just a new prison. None of the men were free—not in life, not in death. They were trapped in the legends others wove around them.

And these legends would live on, even when the bodies had long since rotted away. They would hang, not on the gallows, but in people's mouths, in their songs, in their lies.

The wind tugged at the ropes, and the creaking sounded like laughter, cold and endless.

Thus they became immortal – not in freedom, but in chains of words.

A knit for every neck

The morning smelled of cold smoke and stale beer. The city bells rang, not as a warning, but as an invitation: the spectacle continued. Once again, the crowd gathered as if it were a second fair. Women with baskets, men with jugs, children with shining eyes. The square filled, voices swelled like a flood.

Down in the dungeon, they dragged the last prisoners up. Men who were still alive, but already looked dead. Thin, stinking, their skin chafed by the iron. Some staggered on the steps and had to be dragged by two soldiers. Others walked on their own, with blank expressions, as if they had long since felt the rope in their heads.

The sun hung cold in the sky, no shine, just a pale light that made the ropes gleam like dirty cables. They dangled ready, one next to the other, as if they had been waiting for new goods.

"Forward, you pigs!" yelled a Hanseatic man, pushing one of the pirates forward with his butt. The crowd cheered. A child screamed, "One more! Hang him up!" – and the people laughed as if it were a game.

One of the pirates stumbled and fell to his knees. He raised his head, spat blood onto the steps, and growled, "Fuck all of you." The crowd roared and jeered, the stick slamming onto his back, driving him forward until he fell forward, coughing and laughing at the same time.

The boy trudged among them, the chains heavy. He felt the stares, heard the voices. It was no longer shock, no longer horror—it was routine. The crowd knew: Today they all die. A noose for each neck. No exceptions, no coincidence. Just the work of the gallows.

The gallows stood there like workers in a row, each ready for his man. And the square vibrated with voices already humming the end like a melody.

The first was driven up the steps like a head of cattle. A small man, more bone than flesh, his eyes filled with panic. "Have mercy!" he shrieked, "I only sailed, I never murdered, never plundered!" But the crowd cheered, laughed, and shouted: "Hang him! Hang the rat!"

The executioner placed the rope around his neck, routinely, almost bored. Not a word, not a look. A kick, a crash. The body twitched, hung still. The crowd cheered, but more briefly than before. It was nothing new. Just another neck.

The next man stepped forward, a broad-shouldered man with scars on his face. He laughed, spat, and shouted: "You can hang us, but you'll never beat us! We live on, in your nightmares!" The crowd shouted back, half angrily, half enthusiastically. The rope tightened, his head jerked back, a final laugh, then silence. More cheers—a little louder, because they were aroused by his defiance.

The third fell silently to the ground, barely a sound, barely a twitch. Some in the crowd yawned, others called for "more spectacle."

And so it went on, one after the other. Pleading, cursing, laughter, silence—all disappeared in the same creaking of the ropes. Each death was different, and yet each was the same. A neck, a pull, an end.

The boy watched, forced to go along, step by step, as the line shortened. He heard the screams, the laughter, the creaking. But in his ears, it all merged into a single sound: dull, hollow, endless.

He understood: There was no longer any difference between courage and fear, between defiance and pleading. The rope consumed everything equally. One rope for every neck—and all necks were equal in death.

The crowd cheered, but even their cheers began to repeat themselves, like a song sung too many times.

With every step on the wood, the line grew shorter. The pirates stood shoulder to shoulder, but there was no longer any cohesion. Everyone looked forward, toward the rope, or down, toward the planks, as if they might disappear into the ground.

Some desperately sought the others' gaze, as if they could draw courage from it. But the eyes of their comrades reflected only the same thing: fear, fatigue, the knowledge that no one would escape.

One whispered a prayer, his lips trembling. Another grinned crookedly, as if about to crack another joke, but couldn't utter a word. A third wept silently, tears streaming down the dirt on his face, unashamed.

The one-eyed man stood further back in the line. Blood caked in his beard and hair, his eye glinting like a piece of glass in the dirt. He grinned broadly, even laughing, as the men in front of him were dragged to their feet one by one. "Come on," he muttered, "make way. I want to spit in those bastards' eyes before I dance."

The Hanseatics heard him, spat back, laughed, but they also glanced at him, half amused, half nervous. Because they knew: even now, at the end, this dog could still creep into their heads.

The boy stood a few men away from him, his heart pounding, his stomach empty. He heard the creaking of the ropes, the cheers of the crowd, the whispers and laughter of his comrades. Everything sounded like a single roar, like the sea at night—endless, indifferent.

He understood: The line was no longer a place where men stood. It was a waiting room for death. Everyone waited for their rope, and the gallows made no distinctions. Only the time was different—the end was the same.

And the one-eyed man continued to grin as if he had known all this for a long time.

"Forward, you one-eyed man!" yelled a Hanseatic man, grabbing him roughly by the arm. The man let himself be pulled, didn't stumble, and went along, his grin still broad on his face. His eyes sparkled, cold and wild at the same time.

The crowd roared when they recognized him. "There he is! The devil with one eye! Hang him up!" Stones flew, one hit him in the shoulder, but he laughed, spat blood on the boards, and roared: "Hit better, you cowardly dogs! Tomorrow the crows will eat you and shit in your face!"

People shrieked, women screamed, children howled and yelled at the same time. Even the Hanseatic men laughed—but their hands were harder as they forced him onto the boards.

The rope slid around his neck. But instead of remaining silent, he raised his head, looked out over the crowd, his eyes sparkling, his voice loud, almost like a preacher: "You can hang me, but you won't beat me! I'll laugh into your dreams, into your beds, into your coffins! Every drop of our blood is a curse, and you will perish from it!"

The crowd roared, whistled, spat, but there was also cheering—a sick, crazy clapping, as if they were listening to a juggler delivering his final punchline.

The executioner kicked the board away. The body twitched, the rope tightened. A jerk – and silence. Only the creaking of the rope remained.

The crowd roared, a chorus of hatred and cheers. But his laughter remained in their minds, even as his body hung. His eyes closed, his grin still on his face, frozen by death.

The boy stared at him, his knees weak, his breath shallow. He understood: Even the one-eyed man, who had laughed until the very end, couldn't escape the rope. He, too, was just a neck for a rope.

And yet his laughter echoed – like a curse that no rope could break.

After the one-eyed man, the air was thicker. The crowd was still roaring, but the jeering sounded different—more habit than ecstasy, like a game that's been going on for too long. But the gallows showed no mercy; it continued to work.

The next men were brought forward. One begged, knelt, kissed the dirt, and cried for mercy. The crowd laughed, jeered, some shouted "Let him go!" only to

immediately roar "Hang him!" The executioner did his duty. A kick, a jerk, a twitching body. The jeers erupted briefly and died down in the next breath.

Another stepped up, spat, and sang half a song, his voice hoarse. The rope muffled the verse, causing the words to die in the cough. More cheers, more laughter.

And so it continued, neck and neck. Each with their own look, their own fear, their own defiance. But in the end, it all sounded the same: a creak, a wheeze, a few kicks in the air—then silence.

The crowd was now satiated, as if after a feast. Some were already leaving, with full stomachs and empty cups, laughing as they recounted what they had seen. Children were clutching hands, shouting after the screams they had heard. Women were still gathering glances, some with horror, some with a strange gleam in their eyes.

The boy saw the line shorten, felt the pull of the chain that brought him ever closer to the steps. He saw men he knew—drinking, cursing, laughing in the nights—now like cattle being worked over.

And he realized: There were no heroes here. No song to drown out the noose. Only necks, nooses, corpses. A noose for every neck, until none remained standing.

The wood creaked and the place smelled of sweat, blood and routine.

The line was almost empty. Only a few people remained, and among them the boy. His legs trembled, the iron cut into his skin, the chains as heavy as entire oceans. The gallows creaked before him, the rope already swinging like a tongue that wanted to taste him.

The crowd spotted him, the youngest. A murmur ran through the people, then laughter, whistles, shrill voices. "Look, they're hanging children!" someone shouted. "A pup from the wolf pack!" a woman shrieked. Some laughed, some remained silent, a few looked away – but no one questioned the rope.

The Hanseatic men grabbed him roughly and pushed him forward. His knees buckled, he fell, was pulled up, and pushed further. He stumbled up the steps, his heart pounding as if it were about to burst from his chest.

Up on the board, the executioner placed the rope around his neck. The boy felt the rough hemp rope, cold and heavy. He wanted to scream, wanted to curse,

wanted to say something – but his voice was gone, lost in the noise of the crowd.

He looked out across the square. Faces, hundreds, thousands. Laughing, gawking, drinking. Not a single hint of pity. Only greed. Only the hunger for the next tug on the rope.

The executioner stepped back, ready. The wood creaked beneath his feet, as if it already knew it would soon be empty.

And in that moment, the boy understood the ultimate truth: It didn't matter whether he had sailed or just drunk, whether he had fought or not. It didn't matter whether he was young or old, whether he had prayed or cursed. There were no differences here.

A rope for every neck. Including his.

The kick came, the ground gave way, the rope tightened. A jerk, a scream—and then only the creaking of the rope.

The crowd roared, cheered, and laughed. Another neck, another trophy.

And the place didn't remain silent, it continued to eat.

The Walk to the Scaffold

The bells rang, dull and heavy, as if all of heaven were a judge who knew no mercy. The Hanseatic men tore the last survivors from the dungeon, pushing them out with butts and boots. Chains rattled, mouths spat blood and teeth.

The square had filled up again. Men with beer, women with children, vendors with stalls – but the voices sounded different than before. Less boisterous, less drunken. It was the tiredness after a long celebration, but the hunger remained. Now they just wanted the final act.

The crowd formed a lane. Left and right, faces red with hatred, with curiosity, with the desire to see others die. Spit flew, words like knives: "Pigs! Dogs! You finally die!" Children shouted, laughing, running alongside, throwing stones.

The pirates staggered, one collapsed, his face on the pavement. Immediately, two guards grabbed him, dragged him to his feet, and kicked him in the back

until he stumbled again. Another, half-mad, bit at the arm of a Hanseatic man and was struck down with the butt of a rifle, blood spurting, and the crowd cheering.

But the faces of most of the men were blank. No more curses, no more songs, no more defiance. Only footsteps, heavy and slow, like a heart that knows it will soon stop.

The scaffold waited at the end of the alley. Dark, black-tarred, the wood heavy and high. The rope hung ready, the axe gleaming dully in the morning light. It was no longer a spectacle, no coincidence, no hope. It was simply the end, tied tightly and secure as a knot in a rope.

The boy stumbled along, his eyes wide, his breath shallow. He heard the yelling, the clanging, the creaking of the scaffold in the wind. Every step was heavier, as if the ground were already binding him.

And he knew: This was no longer a march. It was a procession—a procession of victims to the altar, and the god who awaited them was Death.

The steps of the scaffold were black with tar, cracked with rain, and soaked with the blood of those who had stood there before. Every step made the wood groan, as if it felt the weight of the men climbing for the last time.

The Hanseatic men drove them up, one after the other. There were shoves, curses, the metallic rattle of chains. The crowd pressed closer together, the noise rising, then fading, a muted murmur, as if the city itself were holding its breath. It was like the moment in a church when the faithful await the bread—except here the sacrifice was flesh and blood.

A pirate stumbled, his face hitting the step, the wood turning dark. The guards dragged him on, half-conscious, the crowd roared. Another raised his chin defiantly, looked over the heads as if to stare at the sky—but the sky was empty, just gray, indifferent.

At the top of the scaffold, the ropes stood ready. They dangled in the wind, swaying gently as if welcoming the newcomers. Next to them was the axe, struck into a block, gleaming dull, but sharp enough to end the last vestiges of life.

The pirates looked around, some with blank eyes, others with feverish gleams. One laughed briefly, hoarsely, brokenly, as if he'd heard a bad joke. But no one answered. The silence was heavier than any laughter.

The boy followed, feeling the wood beneath his bare feet, cold and merciless. Every step sounded like a drumbeat, a rhythm that knew only one end. The crowd stared, a sea of faces, but their voices had disappeared. All that remained was the creaking of the wood and the swinging of the ropes.

It was no longer a show, no longer a spectacle. It was a worship of death.

At the top of the scaffold, the guards lined up the men. Chains clanged, ropes dangled, the air thick with sweat, blood, and the pungent smell of tar. The pirates stood shoulder to shoulder, but they were alone—each in his own hell, each in his own moment.

The crowd below pressed forward, breaking the silence. A rumble, a murmur, then loud jeers. "Hang them!" - "Let them dance!" - "A rope for each!" Women shrieked, children screamed, men clinked their mugs. It no longer sounded like cheering, but like the howl of a hungry animal smelling blood.

The pirates looked out. Some raised their heads, more defiant than their bodies allowed. Others stared at the ground, as if the pavement could save them. One began to cry, loudly, sobbing, uncontrollably. Another laughed, a gasping, insane laugh that immediately ripped apart in the wind.

The boy stood in the line, the chains around his arms, his neck bare – still. He felt the eyes of the crowd, hundreds, thousands of them, looking at him like an animal about to be slaughtered. He saw the sea of faces, red, sweating, greedy. And he felt: Up here, there was no more wind, no more salt, no more freedom. Only the breath of the rope, cold on his neck, invisible but heavy.

The ropes swayed gently in the wind, and their creaking was louder than any voice. It sounded like a song, a single, dark song that dictated the same lyrics to everyone:*You belong to us. You belong to death.*

The men stood, swaying, silent, or screaming, and the crowd howled back. The scaffold was no longer a place—it was an altar. And they were the victims, each with their own neck, each with the same end.

The executioner stepped forward, a man as broad as a mast, his face hidden behind a hood. He didn't speak a word; he didn't have to. His hands were the language: rough, practiced, merciless. He grabbed the first man and placed the rope around his neck as if tying up an animal.

The crowd went wild. Screams, yells, laughter. "Come on, make it short! Hang the dog!" Women screamed, children clapped, men nudged each other.

The pirate spat on the ground and raised his chin. "Screw you all!" he shouted, but his voice broke as the board gave way. A jolt, a crack. His body thrashed, the crowd howled.

The next one was pushed forward. He begged, wept, fell to his knees. "I don't want to! I don't want to!" The executioner roughly kicked him up, tied the rope, and kicked the board. Another jerk, another creak. The crowd cheered even louder, as if they had drunk the pain.

So it went on, one after the other. One laughed, one cursed, one remained silent. But no one escaped. Everyone ended the same: a jerk, a kick, a creak.

The crowd roared like a theater, as if there were no gallows there, but a stage. Every death was a punchline, every scream a round of applause.

The boy stood in line, watching the men fall, one after the other. He felt the air grow heavier, each breath filled with hemp, blood, and fear. His heart no longer beat to the rhythm of life, but to the rhythm of the ropes.

And he knew: every step, every breath brought him closer to the board. No prayer, no defiance, no laughter could stop it. The play was written, and the gallows read it like a book.

The line grew shorter, step by step. Everyone who stepped forward disappeared. First a face, then a neck in the rope, then a body that thrashed until it hung still. The scaffold spoke only one language: the creaking of the board, the humming of the rope, the dull wheezing in the throat.

The crowd screamed, hooted, and laughed, but even their hooting slowly merged into a steady roar. No single scream remained in memory, no name, no face. Everything was just a single stream of death and hooting, like a mill grinding grain without checking what it was.

Some pirates walked silently, some screamed, some laughed – but in the end, it all sounded the same. A rope, a body, a jerk. Over and over. Always the same.

The boy was still standing, his arms chained, his legs weak. He lost count, didn't know how many were still ahead of him. He only heard the creaking, over and over again, the creaking, the creaking—it burned itself into his head like a song he can't get rid of.

One of the men next to him began to laugh, hoarse and broken. "Do you hear it?" he gasped, "the scaffold is singing. It's singing for us." Then it was his turn, and his laughter broke off in a spurt.

The boy saw it, heard it, and understood: There were no differences here anymore. No heroes, no cowards, no kings, no beggars. The scaffold devoured everyone equally.

A mill made of wood, rope, and blood. And they were just the grain.

The line was empty. Only he remained. The boy. The chains on his wrists clanged, the iron heavy as entire oceans. Two Hanseatic men grabbed him and yanked him forward. His legs wouldn't move, but they stumbled, carrying him nonetheless.

The crowd roared, roared, laughed, and howled. "There! The little one! Hang the puppy!" Children screamed, women spat, men raised their mugs. A thousand-headed beast that only wanted this one neck.

The boy stumbled toward the center of the scaffold. The executioner was already standing ready, tall, broad, and faceless. The rope dangled, a gray circle that closed before he even touched it.

He wanted to scream, but his voice was stuck. He wanted to cry, but his eyes were dry. He wanted to run, but his legs were like lead. Only his heart was still beating, pounding, drumming, as if it wanted to fight its way free.

The executioner's hands wrapped the rope around his neck. Rough, scratchy, heavy. A knot in his neck, cold as stone. The boy sucked in the air as if it were the last he would ever taste.

He looked out. A sea of faces. No pity, no mercy. Only eyes, greedy, luminous, alive. And he understood: This was the path to the scaffold. No path, no march, no journey. It was just a maw that swallowed him.

The executioner stepped back. The wood creaked, as if whispering his end.

The kick came. The floor disappeared. The rope tightened.

And the scaffold closed the last mouth that still breathed.

The crowd roared. The mill was complete.

Headless, but not dead

The axe fell with a dull crash, the wood vibrated, blood spurted like a ripped-open barrel. A head rolled across the planks, struck the block, and landed, its eyes still half-open. The crowd roared, laughed, and screamed. Children cheered, women held scarves over their mouths, men clinked cups.

But barely was the blood warm when the voices began to grow louder. "I swear to God, he was still running!" one cried. "Didn't you see? Headless, three steps, sure!" "Three? Nonsense, it was seven!" roared another. "He walked to the edge of the scaffold!" "No, no," a woman yelled, "ten steps, I counted, I was right at the front! Ten steps, and then he fell!"

The discussion swelled like a storm. Everyone wanted to have seen more, everyone swore they had witnessed a miracle. Some crossed themselves, prayed, others laughed, drank, and shouted: "He was a devil, and the devil himself kept him on his feet!"

The Hanseatic men snorted and tried to shout down the voices. "Quiet! This is a fairy tale, nothing but a fairy tale! The dog is dead, and dead he will stay!" But the crowd didn't listen. For the crowd had already found a better song than any law.

His head was still lying there, his eyes fixed, his mouth half-open. But in the voices of the crowd, he lived on, walking along the planks, taking steps, headless, but not dead.

The boy—had he still been alive, had he heard it—would have understood: The truth died with the head. But the legend continued, with or without flesh.

The scaffold creaked, and in its creaking lay the whisper:*The body dies, history continues.*

As soon as the blood seeped into the cracks of the scaffold, the gossip intensified. Voices shouted over each other, each claiming to have seen more than the other.

"Twelve steps, I swear on my mother's grave!" cried an old man, his hands raised to heaven. "Twelve? Are you blind? It was fifteen! Almost to the end of the scaffold!" roared a younger man, with beer in his beard and madness in his eyes. "Nonsense," snarled a woman, "he even stepped down from the planks, headless, and took two more steps across the square! I saw it!"

Laughter, jeers, applause. Children shouted the numbers, making rhymes out of them. Merchants eagerly seized on the words, already selling "Ballads of the Headless Walk." Some sang half-invented verses, and the crowd roared along.

Others whispered in lowered voices, as if it were too dangerous to be said aloud: "It was a curse. A pact with the devil. That's why he still went on. And everyone who saw it now carries the curse with them." A few made the sign of the cross, others laughed, drank, and screamed louder to drown out their fear.

The Hanseatics raged, shouting: "Enough! The dog is dead! His legend dies with him!" But they knew they were losing. For the blood on the scaffold was still fresh – and already it was a fairy tale greater than any steel, any axe, any rope.

And while his head remained still, his face frozen, Störtebeker continued to walk among the voices. First three steps, then seven, then twelve, then fifteen. Tomorrow it would be twenty. Soon no one would know where the truth ended.

The wood of the scaffold creaked, and in the creak there was a laugh:*You can let heads roll, but not words.*

The crowd roared, but not like before. It wasn't just jeering, no carnival roar. Now there was something else in the voices—awe, fear, greed.

"Only a superman can run like that!" one cried, his eyes wide. "Not even dead can he be defeated!" "He was a saint!" a woman shrieked, as if she had seen the body of Christ. "A saint of freedom!" "Holy?" roared another, "It was a devil, sent by the sea itself! Only the devil can walk headless!"

So the voices were divided, but they agreed on one thing: no rope, no axe, no executioner had broken the man.

Children jumped on the benches, shouting, "Headless! Headless!" – a refrain, a new game that would be sung in every alley tomorrow. Merchants laughed, rubbed their hands, and shouted, "Come, come, hear the ballad of the headless man!" They sold pieces of paper, splinters of wood, and soaked rags, supposedly full of his blood.

The Hanseatic men stood stiffly by, their hands on their sword hilts, their faces red with rage. They screamed, but no one heard them anymore. They had defeated the body, but the legend escaped.

Whether it was three steps or fifteen, whether it was the devil or a miracle—it no longer mattered. The truth lay in the filth of the scaffold, dead and silent. But the myth lived, greater, louder, immortal.

And while the head lay rigidly on the boards, the story ran away. Not with legs, but with mouths.

The scaffold creaked, and in the creak lay a cruel realization:*Heads roll, but stories have no neck.*

That same evening, the taverns resounded with songs. Not of grief, not of silence—but of the new legend born on the scaffold.

"Störtebeker, the headless dog, still ran, bloody, wounded! They wanted to kill him, but he kept going. Death itself made no rider!"

Men bellowed it around their full cups, women laughed, children screamed the chorus. Every table had its own version. Sometimes he walked three steps, sometimes seven, sometimes twenty. One swore he was still fighting, headless, arms raised as if he wanted to grab the axe himself.

The rum magnified the legend. Every sip added steps, every cup a new miracle. Soon Störtebeker had walked the entire length of the scaffold, now left the square, now he had wandered out to sea, bloody, headless, but unstoppable.

The corpses still hung outside in the wind, the crows already pecking at them. But inside, in the warm stench of the taverns, the man lived larger, louder, more immortal than ever before. Death had only taken his body, but the throats of men blew him back to life.

The Hanseatics tried to protest loudly, saying he had died miserably, pleading and whimpering. But no one would listen. Drinkers want miracles. Laughters want stories.

And so he sat with them at the table, the headless pirate. Not as flesh, but as song, as lies, as truth that no one wanted to separate anymore.

The scaffold stood outside, dark, wet with blood. But in the taverns, it continued to echo like a second sea:*Headless, but not dead.*

The next morning, the fog hung heavy over the city, yet the legend was already everywhere. It ran through the alleys, faster than any rumor, faster than the sun.

Children played the "headless walk." One held a cloth over his shoulders and stumbled three, five, seven steps until he fell, shrieking and laughing. Others shouted the rhymes they had heard in the taverns that evening.

Merchants touted "Blood Drops of the Headless Man"—red stones they had collected at the harbor. Women whispered, their eyes shining: "Did you hear? He fought back, even without a head!" Men swore he had run farther than the city itself. "They say he even made it to the sea."

Everyone had their own version, everyone wanted to be a witness. The truth had become a market. Death had become a business. A head in the dust had become a banner that flew higher than any Hanseatic League symbol.

The Hanseatic League tried desperately to get their story across. "He fell miserably, silent, cowardly, like a dog!" they shouted in the squares. But the people just laughed, spat, and sang their songs louder. For what is stronger: a law with a sword – or a song in a frenzy?

The scaffold still stood, wet, stinking, with corpses hanging from the beams. But the city was no longer looking. It had a better image in its mind: the pirate still running, headless, defiant, invincible.

And so he wasn't dead. Not in the wind, not in the song, not in the rage. He was headless—but he kept going.

The corpses still hung there, the wind tugged at them, the crows pecked, the blood dripped into the dust. The stench settled over the square like a blanket. The flesh died as it always dies—slowly, stinking, inexorably.

But outside, in the streets, something else was alive. Men roared in the taverns, women whispered at the fountains, children shouted in the markets: "Störtebeker is still running! Störtebeker isn't dying!"

Every mouth told a different truth. Some made him a saint, some a devil, some a ghost. But they all had one thing in common: He wasn't dead. Not in their words, not in their minds.

The Hanseatic League could stretch ropes, roll heads, and build gallows. But it couldn't hang the legends. They continued to flutter, free as sails in the wind, stronger than any law, louder than any sermon.

Störtebeker had fallen, his head in the dust, his body hanging in the wind. But his name lived on, greater, louder, more immortal.

Headless, but not dead.

And perhaps that was the cruelest truth: He was no longer free. For his freedom no longer belonged to him, but to those who told his story. He lived on—but as a legend, not as a human being.

The scaffold was silent. The city sang.

And the song would never end.

A roar into eternity

The next day, the city lay heavy, as if after a storm. The alleys stank of beer, vomit, and burnt fat. But what really hung in the air wasn't smoke or dirt—it was the echo.

The voices still screamed, even though the square was empty. Screams that had eaten into the walls, the roofs, the pavement. The gallows creaked in the wind, the corpses hung crooked, the crows cawed, pecked, and fluttered. But it wasn't death that was the loudest—it was the words.

In every tavern, people were singing, shouting, and lying. "He walked three steps!" - "Seven!" - "Twenty!" Each table had its own number, and with every cup of rum, the number increased. Men jumped onto benches, shouting verses, women laughed, children blared rhymes.

The Hanseatic men patrolled, swords at their hips, faces tired and tense. They tried to keep quiet, but their voices had long since been drowned out. Their orders and threats were drowned out by the yelling, as if they were nothing more than a faint whine in the storm.

For what remained of the execution? Not the ropes, not the axe, not the smell of blood. Only the roar remained. It had begun with screams at the gallows, but now it belonged to everyone: the children, the drunkards, the merchants who sold ballads.

The roar was free, untamed, headless, neckless, and ropeless. It ran through the city, crawled over the walls, rushed down to the harbor, and the sea took it away.

And so he lived on, not in the flesh, but in the echo. Störtebeker, the headless, the immortal. His last roar was not his scream, but the scream that the city could never shake off.

The harbor was not silent. Even the creaking of the ships sounded as if it were answering the screams. The sails hung lazily, but in every tavern, on every quay, people were talking, shouting, and whispering.

"I saw it, he was still walking with his head under his arm!" shouted a sailor, half-blinded from rum. "Nonsense," roared the next, "no head, but with steps like a king!"
"King? Devil! The devil himself was inside him, and the sea brought him back."

And so the stories grew, loaded onto ships, in barrels of salted herring, in sacks of grain, in skins full of beer. Every sailor who left the city carried a piece of the legend with them.

Soon it continued along the coast, to Lübeck, to Bremen, to Danzig. Stories were told in the harbors, songs were sung in the taverns. Sometimes it was a miracle, sometimes a curse, sometimes a cautionary tale, sometimes a song of freedom.

The sea itself roared, indifferent, but it carried the words onward. Every wave seemed to pick them up, every crash against the quayside sounded like a whisper:*Headless, but not dead.*

The Hanseatic League wanted to make an example. They wanted to sow fear. But what they sowed was a song. And songs travel faster than gunboats and last longer than laws.

So Störtebeker sailed on, not with ships of wood, but with ships of words. And this squadron was unstoppable.

A roar that grew louder the further it moved from the gallows.

Wherever a ship docked, Störtebeker came ashore – not in flesh, but from the mouths of the sailors.

In Bremen, they sang that he was a martyr, a hero of the poor, who mocked the rich, even when his head was in the dirt. The children imitated him, one falling, the other continuing to run—headless, but laughing louder than ever.

In Danzig, it was said that he was a demon, a monster in human form, who even walked headless because the devil wouldn't let go of him. Priests ranted against his name, making the sign of the cross, but the men in the taverns sang louder, mocked, laughed—and the more the church demonized him, the bigger he became.

In Lübeck, they spoke of him as a king, the “king without a crown, but with a roar the sea would never forget.” There, street urchins painted his symbol on walls, a crude image of a skull, headless, but with a crown of nails.

Every city took what it wanted. Hero or devil, king or demon, martyr or monster. But all the stories had one thing in common: He wasn't silent. He wasn't dead. He kept roaring.

And the roar grew louder, rising over cities and harbors, rising over markets and taverns. Every mouth was a piece of the sea, and in every mouth raged the same storm.

The man was dead, but the echo was bigger than his body ever was.

And so he roared, across walls, across countries, across seas – a roar into eternity.

The Hanseatic League weren't stupid. They heard the bubbling, the growing, the songs that resonated louder in the alleys than the sermons in the churches. So they tried to stifle the echo.

They placed the pirates' heads on pikes in the middle of the market. Bloody faces, glassy eyes, mouths open like dirty bowls. "Look!" the guards shouted. "This is how thieves, murderers, and traitors end!"

But people didn't see what they were supposed to see. Children threw stones at the skulls and screamed: "The headless man is coming! He's walking again!" Women crossed themselves, but in the next breath they whispered to their neighbors about the "seven steps" or the "twenty steps" he was supposed to have taken. Men drank in front of the impaled heads and sang songs, cruder, louder, dirtier than before.

The Hanseatic League preached order, but it only created more legends. Every head erected was not proof of victory, but a trophy for the stories. "There it hangs!" one cried. "But yesterday it was still running! And tomorrow it will continue to run, with or without the skull!"

The authorities noticed, but they were powerless. Their swords were iron, but the throats of the crowd were wind—and wind devours iron if it rages long enough.

The louder the Hanseatic League roared, the louder the crowd responded. And soon it was no longer the Hanseatic League talking about Störtebeker. It was the people, the streets, the sea.

The roar could no longer be stopped. It no longer belonged to anyone.

And so it devoured the Hanseatic League itself.

The days passed, but the screaming didn't subside. It traveled with the ships out onto the water, crept into the sails, the ropes, the barrels of rum. And the sea, indifferent as ever, carried it on—not as mercy, but as an echo.

When the waves broke, voices could be heard. "Headless, but not dead!" the sailors swore as the roar grew louder. In storms, its roar seemed to drown out even the thunder. Some swore they had seen it: a shadow walking on the waves, headless, but with footsteps the water couldn't swallow.

The Hanseatic League tried to keep quiet about it. But even their own sailors came back with songs, rumors, and fairy tales. "We heard him," they said, "in the night, off Heligoland. He was laughing, headlong, and the wind laughed along with him."

So the roar spread, from coast to coast, from harbor to harbor. No rope, no axe, no spears could stop it. For who can gag the sea? Who can pluck out the tongue of the wind?

And soon he no longer belonged just to Hamburg, not to the Hanseatic League, not even to the pirates who had died with him. He belonged to the sea itself. Every wave an echo, every gust a curse, every storm a song.

The sea roared with him. And in the roar lay eternity.

The gallows rotted, the heads disintegrated, the flesh was devoured by crows. Everything the Hanseatic League had wanted to leave behind perished. But the roar remained. It hung not in the ropes, not in the wood, not in the blood—it hung in the air, in the sea, in people's throats.

A farmer sang it while plowing, a sailor while hoisting sail, a child while playing in the dirt. A curse, a song, a laugh. Everyone carried it forward, everyone made it bigger.

The Hanseatic League had believed they could conquer the sea with iron and hemp. But they had only awakened the storm. The roar was greater than them, greater than the walls, greater than death.

And so Störtebeker, the man who drank, who cursed, who loved, who stole, who fought, became more than a man. He became an echo that never ended. A roar that rolled through the centuries, like waves that never rest.

Headless, but not dead. Dead, but louder than the living.

Perhaps that was the ultimate truth: Freedom doesn't live in the body. It lives in the throats, in the stories, in the screams that no ropes can bind.

And so it echoed, across harbor and sea, across cities and countries, across time. A roar that knew no chains, no law, no Hanseatic League.

A roar into eternity.

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