The Flying Dutchman

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Contents

The stench of the harbor

The harbor stinks like an old lie left in the sun too long. You take a step closer, and it comes at you like a barking dog: rotten fish wallowing in their own eyes; wet wood, eroded by salt, as if the sea had teeth; the sweet, sticky scent of spilled rum that has seeped into the cracks like cheap prayers; urine that has married seaweed; a whiff of sulfur, as if hell had an open window somewhere beyond the pier. When you breathe here, you count your breaths like coins, because none of what you breathe is yours. You only borrow it from all that rots and comes again.

It's still early, but the morning already bears the face of a battered boxer. The sky hangs low and gray above the masts, which look like frayed matchsticks. Seagulls screech as if beating the day to work. I walk past the sheds, their doors hanging crooked on their hinges, and I swear they're staring back. Faces live between the boards: a few toothless, a few with too many teeth, all hungry. One spits, another laughs, a third sighs, and the rest wait for something that doesn't happen.

A cart rumbles over the planks, pulled by a horse with a coat that looks like an old sofa. The driver has the nose of a man who's seen too many winters and eyes that already live in next autumn. He shouts something like "Look out!" and "Get out of here, lad!" but the words fall like dull stones into the water. A sailor who slept the night in a puddle raises his head and grins, his lips like a wet, torn wound, and I know he's one of those men who don't fear death because they don't expect enough from life to be afraid.

The taverns' mouths are still half-closed, but the bottles in the window are already baring their teeth. "The Blue Eel," "The Last Lantern," "The Crooked Tiller"—names like promises broken only to be spoken again. Under an awning, a woman wipes the blood from the threshold. It's not much, just a memory in red. She does it with the indifference of someone who has seen worse: men who have choked on their own lies; sailors who believed a knife was merely a shiny word. She nods at me, and I nod back, and in this little transaction lies everything you need to know about the port: We see each other, but we don't see each other.

The rats are the secret scribes here. They know the names you want to forget and the paths you'll never walk again. One scurries past my boot, carrying a piece of bread someone probably still wanted to eat. Another ventures onto the bakery's threshold, and the baker, a man with hands like spades, takes a step, lifts his foot, and lets it fall again. "Let it be," his shoulder says to his

forehead, "there are too many of them and too few of us." That's how it is here: Things win not because they are strong, but because they are many and have patience.

The boats in front of me creak. The sound is an ancient language you don't need to learn, because it sinks into your bones as soon as you hear it. The planks speak of storms that dwell in stomachs; of men who cling to the railing like children to their mother's hand; of curses that rise from throats like smoke from a chimney. There are boats that have more stories than planks, and yet they hold up nonetheless. Maybe because the stories hold them together. Maybe because otherwise they'd fall apart and no one would look anymore.

A boy is running—shirt too short, legs too long, looks too old. He's carrying a basket in which fish still wriggle as if they had the sea in their stomachs. He calls out to someone I don't know and disappears behind a pile of ropes. I watch him go and think that one day he'll smell like his father: of work and alcohol and trying to wake up twice in the same day. A man whose face is a map of scars calls out, "Hey, you!" and I pretend that everyone here says "Hey, you!" and no one has a name they can remember. It's easier to live like this when you're not on lists.

The wind picks up, that capricious friend who first caresses you and then pushes you. It carries a few words to me, spoken in a language I don't speak, but I understand the note: the greedy melody of an impending bargain. Barrels are lined up like fat monks seated around an altar, and they are filled with things that will kill you or save you, or both: rum, salt, tar, dried meat, lies. A fellow in a hat that has seen better heads taps the staves and nods, as if he can hear how much promise sloshes in each barrel. "Good stuff," he says to no one. "Good stuff," the air repeats, because here it has learned to flatter.

In the alley between the "Last Lantern" and the "Crumb Pine," squats a man who might once have been a priest. He holds a book in his hand, but the pages are blank or soaked, and his lips move as if in prayer, but only a hoarse croak comes out. I pause for a moment, not because I believe in God, but because I believe in people who woke up too late. He looks up, and his eyes are two extinguished candles. "Is he blessing the sea?" I wonder, "or is he asking it to wring his neck?" You can do both in the same way here.

Inside, behind the ajar doors, the music of the day begins: a clinking of glasses, a laugh that starts too hard and then breaks off, a voice naming prices as if she were speaking the weather. A whore, thin as a knife, stands in the doorway smoking. Her hair is the color of rust clinging to a nail. She studies me as if I

were a bet one can lose without regret. "Hey, sailor," she says, and I want to say I'm not one, just someone who can't get the sea out of his head. But I wave her off. She shrugs and grins: "Later." The whole city lies in that word: everything is later, until suddenly it's too late.

The first cries of the market rise like fog. A fishmonger is hawking wares that died yesterday, but acts as if they had just taken their last breath. A shopkeeper is arguing with a customs officer, and the customs officer looks as if he were married to his uniform. One knife is drawn, another remains in his pocket, but both do the same job: cutting the air into edible portions. A whistle blows from the pier, and whoever invented the necessity of order applauds. But order here is like a bad joke: people laugh out of politeness, not joy.

I lean against a post and feel the wood working against my back, a steady, ancient breathing. Somewhere in the distance, water laps against stones, and in my head, it laps back. I know why I'm here. Not for the money—money is as loyal as a cat. Not for the fame—fame is a mirror that shows only yourself when you despise yourself most. I'm here for the ride, for this accursed movement that pulls you away from everything you know, because what you know is a trap. The city marks your step, and the ground grows heavy, and then you can't walk. At sea, at least you can fall.

A man next to me coughs, a dry, old cough that sounds like a sack of nuts cracked too quickly. "Hey, friend," he says, "you're looking for a ship." I look at him. His face is a folded-up letter no one wants to read anymore. His hands are darker than his jacket, and his fingernails have stories dug into the dirt that are better left unheard. "Maybe," I say. He nods, as if I'd said something clever. "Then prick up your ears," he says, "today, men who were better off staying are leaving, and men who were better off leaving are staying. If you're lucky, you won't be one of them." A joke that reeks of metal. He points his chin at the water. "Over there. They're looking."

I follow his gaze. Between the swaying masts that scrape the gray sky lies a ship no bigger than the others, but it lies differently, as if it weren't touching the harbor. No name on the stern, or I can't read it because the wood and salt have eroded it. The sails are furled, but they don't seem tired; they are taut, as if they despise the air. On the deck, shadows move that look like men, but the way they walk is quieter, more determined. One is leaning against the bulwarks, and although the distance is great, I have the feeling he sees me. I look away because I respect things that see me before I want to see them.

"Are you coming?" The old man has already retreated into his coughing again. I nod. We walk past barrels, past ropes that sleep like snakes, past hooks that once held meat, and sometimes still do. In front of the "Blue Eel," a man is now standing on a crate, giving a speech about work, faith, and kings, and no one is listening. Three children are playing dice with teeth that don't look like baby teeth. A dog is chasing its own tail and winning. The wind shifts, and suddenly the smell of the harbor is a different melody: more tar, less blood, more promises, less memory. I breathe in as if there's something new in there, and breathe out as if I only imagined it.

As we reach the plank leading to the dock, the sea raises its voice. It's not a threat, just a reminder: I've always been here, it says, and I won't wait. The water has a kind of politeness that makes you freeze. The old man stops, points to the ship with the gnawed name, and says, "You pay in cash." I laugh, teeth baring. "Cash is good," I reply, "cash forgets you faster." I step to the edge, watch my reflection in the dark, ridged glass below me, how it breaks and melts again, and I wonder if you can lose your soul if you're not sure you ever possessed it.

A lantern rattles behind me. In front of me, a rope swings like a pendulum. Somewhere, a bell clangs, once, twice, as if about to start a game. The sky opens a thin slit of light, and the gray becomes lighter, but no friendlier. I think of all the men who stood here, with the same knot in their chests, and I think of all those who came back, and how few there were. The wood beneath my boots is wet, and each floorboard has a different memory. I put one foot in front of the other, and the harbor exhales behind me as if it had been holding its breath for a long time. Maybe it always does that when someone leaves. Maybe it hopes we'll all come back so it can keep stinking.

"Hey, you!" A voice, for the third time today, and this time even my name is being used. I look up. At the end of the jetty stands a man who looks like his own shadow. No coat, just a jacket that no longer believes its seams. He doesn't raise his hand to wave, but to keep quiet. "Work?" he asks. The word doesn't fall, it lands. I nod. He studies me as if his eyes were a ruler. "Can you drink?" he asks. "Yes." "Can you stand when you drink?" I shrug. "Sometimes." He doesn't smile, but the scar at the corner of his mouth stirs. "That's enough."

Behind him, the nameless ship makes a sound you can only hear if you're ready to hear it: a soft, contented crack, as if it already has you in its teeth. The stench of the harbor still hangs in my throat, but it's losing out to something else, something that smells of direction, of travel, of an answer you don't dare ask. I look back, one last look at the taverns, the sheds, the faces made of

planks and fog, and they look back, indifferent, as always. Then I set off, and the plank sways, and the water says: Welcome, or something. And somewhere, far out, where the color of the sky shifts to the color of the sea, a dark idea rubs its hands together.

He didn't stand there like a man, but like a damned boundary stone. One you either have to pass or stay put. The captain. No name, no "Mr. So-and-so," no legend, not yet. Just a guy with a face that looked like God had blunted the knife he used to cut skin. His forehead was a furrowed battlefield, a scar ran across from temple to jaw, as if he'd once rammed his fist into an angel's stomach and the beast had kicked back. But his eyes – they were still. Still like a knife lying on the table, yet already threatening everyone.

He stepped out of the shadows of a tavern, unhurried, without that drunken stagger that most sailors have when they're new on board. No, this one moved like someone who hadn't even touched the ground. Someone who had stood far too long on decks shaking with the roar of cannons. He didn't smell of rum. Not of cheap sweat. He smelled of salt and iron, like a sword lying in the rain. And the few guys who had just been baring their teeth in some argument over dice suddenly stopped. As if someone had turned off the music.

The dock rats, the would-be sailors who usually feel like kings when they have a knife in their hand—they all unconsciously moved aside. To make room, because here came someone who no longer had to fight for space. The captain hadn't spoken a word yet, but he had already stifled all the voices.

The corner of his mouth twitched briefly, as if he'd heard a bad joke, and he pulled on his pipe. The smoke tasted of burnt seaweed; I swear, it settled like a gray film over the scene, over the faces, over the entire stinking harbor. And in that moment, it was clear: This man wasn't here to talk. This man was here to take.

"I need men." Those were the first words he spoke, and they came not as a request, but as a judgment. No "please," no "looking for work," no "are you interested?" Just a statement. And that was it. Whoever was standing there knew: Either you go with him—or you disappear before he even looks at you.

One of the dockside louts, boastful and half-drunk, stepped forward, grinned crookedly, and said, "And if we don't want to, Captain?" – a sentence that sounded like a child telling a butcher that pigs can fly. The answer wasn't a word. It was just a look. The captain looked at him, once, and the grin was silent, as if his throat had been squeezed. He staggered back, bumped into the

wall of the tavern, and no one laughed. Not one. Because no one could shake the feeling that that look had more power than any knife.

I swear, the harbor held its breath for a moment. The seagulls screamed, the rats rustled, the barrels groaned—but it was all just background noise. In the foreground was him, the captain, and you knew the damned sea already knew him. The sea had already lent him its voice, and he had never given it back.

He carried on as if nothing had happened. He spoke again: "Tonight we sail. Whoever wants gold, come. Whoever wants women, come. Whoever wants to live, better stay here." Then he spat in the dirt, turned around, and disappeared toward the pier. No negotiations, no explanations, no plan on paper. Just an invitation to damnation, and a hell of a lot of people were willing to accept it.

I stopped. I felt my heart beating as if it had just changed rhythm. There walked someone who wasn't a man, but a storm in a coat. And I knew: This won't just be a ride. This will be a story that will either consume me or make me immortal. Maybe both.

The pub smelled like what the harbor vomits up in its sleep. "The Blue Eel" – a name as honest as a drunken confessor. You step in, and everything hits you at once: the smoke that settles over your head like a filthy curtain; the babble of ten different languages that all sound the same – greed; the clatter of dice on wood, accompanied by the screech of a whore pretending to be having fun because she has nothing else to offer. The floor was sticky. Not from yesterday, not from today. From every day that has ever happened. Wine, beer, rum, blood, sweat, vomit – everything left a layer here. If you fell, you stuck like a damn beetle in honey.

At the bar stood a barman who looked like he was sleeping in his own beer. A face like old leather, his eyes red-rimmed, and hands that had long since lost respect for banknotes. He opened a keg, and the beer flowed into the mug like an apology. Nobody drank here for the taste. They drank because they needed something to hold on to while the world swayed.

A few sailors were playing cards. The kind of men who never win, no matter what cards they're dealing with. Beside them was a gaunt fellow with a pipe longer than his brain. He grinned, and you could see his rotten teeth, like a pile of rotten planks. On the table were piles of copper coins, a few silver pieces, a dagger. In the corner, someone was singing. No melody, just a hoarse hum that sounded more like a prayer no one wanted to hear. A whore was squatting on

his lap, laughing at nothing, and he held her as if she might run away, even though her eyes were long gone.

I took a seat at the edge. I didn't order anything. I watched. That was the trick. Here, you didn't always have to play along. Sometimes just watching was enough. And watching meant you learned the rules: who speaks too loudly, who laughs too hard, who stares too long. The mistakes that will send you to your grave are as obvious here as the bottles on the shelf. But most people didn't see them. Because they didn't want to.

Then it happened. Not with trumpets, not with warning. Just like that. The guy with the pipe lost a game he should never have won. He threw down the cards, stood up, reached for the dagger. All in a motion as fluid as the spit running from the corner of his mouth. His opponent, a sailor with arms like ropes and eyes like two glass beads, laughed in his face. And that was his mistake. One laugh too many. The blade slid under the ribs, in, out, no fuss, no shouting. A hiss, like piercing an old hose.

The sailor slumped as if his floor had been stolen. His beer tipped over, flowed across the table, and dripped into the pool of blood. Two fluids mingling fraternally. Someone screamed, perhaps a woman, perhaps a man, hard to tell with the noise. But the scream was only a brief spark. Then silence. Not the silence of a church. A silence like in a boxing ring, when someone is already on the ground and everyone knows: it's over.

The piper stood there, breathing heavily as if he'd just conquered the sea. No one intervened. No one called for the guard. Here at the "Blue Eel," murder was just another way to end an evening. The landlord came, saw the body, sighed as if someone had dropped their favorite glass, and wiped the table with a wet rag. "Don't let it drip on the floor," he muttered. "It'll attract rats."

The corpse remained seated. Its head hung forward, its arms slack, its eyes on the cards it had lost. One of the players took the money, stuffed it in his pocket, and grinned. "I don't need his luck either." No one protested. The money was now free. Like everything here was free, if you took it while the other person was still warm.

The whore giggled, took the dead man's mug, took a sip, and spat it out. "Shitty taste," she said, and the group laughed again. As if it were all just a joke, and the dead man was the punchline. The blood kept flowing, dripping quietly, dripping on and on, as if it wouldn't stop. I watched and thought: This was the first corpse of the trip, and we hadn't even set foot on the planks yet.

The harbor was alive. Not like a human being lives, with heart and brain. No, it lived like a disease you can't get rid of. It was a body full of alleys that writhed like intestines. It was a stomach that swallowed anyone, be they sailor, whore, or rat. And it only spat you out when you were already half-rotted. The stench you smelled wasn't simply decay. It was breath. The breath of a monster too big to kill with bare hands.

When the wind blew, it didn't just bring salt from the sea. It brought voices. The screams of men who had writhed on the gallows here twenty years ago. The shrieks of women bleeding to death in the alleys because they had the misfortune to meet the wrong eye. And sometimes, laughter. An old, malicious laugh that emerged from the cracks in the cobblestones. You didn't know if it was real or if the rum was just giving you hallucinations. But in the end, it made no difference. The harbor was always laughing at you.

By day, the walls, the towers, the sail poles, the rickety wood were visible. But at night, when the lanterns swayed and the shadows were longer than the people, his face changed. Suddenly there was an eye in a window that was supposed to be empty. Suddenly a hand reaching out for you, and when you turned around, there was only an old barrel. I've seen men walk into the harbor and never come back out. Not because they were dead, but because the harbor had swallowed them, sucked them into its moist belly as if they'd never been there.

The alleys stank of wet hemp, rotten meat, and cheap perfume. But the stench was more than just filth. It was memory. Every breath carried the story of hundreds who had fallen here. Every puddle was a map of urine and rainwater, leading you to places you didn't want to be. And when you stumbled in the darkness, you stumbled over bones neither old enough to be white nor young enough to still bear names.

The houses leaned over you like old matrons, wanting to see if you were any good. Their beams creaked like bones dragged too long. Doors stood open, inviting you in, and you knew: whoever goes in doesn't always come out again. Windows gleamed like sleepless eyes. Every stone had teeth. Every nail was a hook. The harbor was a shark, and you were the blood in the water.

And always those sounds: seagulls screaming like cursed children. Rats singing in the barrels. The lapping of the waves, dull, greedy, like an executioner's heart. Above it all, the metallic screech of ropes on masts, as if the ships themselves were howling. The sea out there was free, yes—but here, right at the edge of the world, it was chained. And the chains were the harbor.

Some say a harbor is refuge. A harbor is homecoming. Screw it. This harbor wasn't a home. It was an inn for the dead. Everyone who docked here became part of his body. Sometimes you sailed back out, but the harbor stayed with you like a plague. Even when you had land in sight, even when the sea glittered, you still had the stench in your lungs. And when you stood on deck at night, staring up at the stars, you heard him laugh. Always laughing.

I stood there and knew: This harbor wasn't a place you could leave. It never let you go. It only made you believe you'd left it behind. And when you're old, when you're finishing your last bottle somewhere on another continent, you'll smell it again. That damned stench that won't go away. Because the harbor isn't a place. The harbor is a curse.

He didn't sit behind a table with a pen and ink. Forget that. There were no parchment contracts, no seals, no royal crest. The captain didn't need any of that. His contract was the knife at his belt and the way he looked at you. And everyone who met him instinctively knew: If you say yes, you sell yourself out. If you say no, you sell yourself out, too.

He stood at the pier, a lantern above him casting more shadow than light. Beside him was a barrel of rum, half full, half empty—hard to tell. Men passed by, curious, drunk, looking for a quick way out of their own misery. Every port is full of those who want to escape: away from debt, from women, from illness, from themselves. The captain was their ticket. A one-way ticket, but they didn't know that, or didn't want to know.

"Gold," he said. No grand speeches. No promises of wealth, fame, or retirement. Just that one word. Gold. And the men's faces twitched. Gold was always enough. One laughed, showing stumps of teeth. "How much?" he asked. The captain blew out smoke, so slowly it seemed like a threat. "More than you can ever hold." And the guy grinned, as if he'd already won, even though he'd long since lost.

The first bottle of rum went around. Whoever drank was in. No handshake, no signature. Just a sip from the devil's throat, and you were in the crew. Some did it with a laugh, others with a gulp as if it were poison. One refused. A short guy with a crooked back, looked as if he had spent too many nights in rat holes. "Not with me," he said. "I'd rather go to the dungeon than out to sea with you." That was the last thing he said. The captain didn't even draw his knife. He just looked. One look, one step forward – and the little guy stumbled back, fell, his head hit the bollard. Dead. Just like that. No applause, no scream. Just a muffled thud and then silence.

The rest drank. Everyone. No one wanted to share the little boy's fate. The bottle went round and round, sticky lips, trembling hands, greed in their eyes. With every sip, a piece of them died, and they felt it. But no one put the bottle down. Not one.

Next to me stood an old sailor with only one ear. He whispered as if speaking to the shadows: "This isn't a contract. It's a pact. And once you sign it, it'll eat you from the inside." I asked, "So why are you drinking?" He grinned crookedly. "Because there's no other way anyway." Then he gulped down the rum as if he were burying himself.

The crew list grew, invisible but tangible. Everyone who touched the bottle was branded. You saw it in their eyes: a dull glow, a residue of hope mingled with fear. And I knew: they hadn't pledged their allegiance to the captain. They had pledged their allegiance to hell. The captain was just the middleman.

Later, in the darkness, when the lantern was almost out and the men were already staggering on the planks, I heard him mutter, "Anyone who stays on land now is already dead." It wasn't a threat. It was just a fact. And the harbor, that stinking beast, laughed softly as the rats approached.

In every harbor, there are these figures who see more than is good for them. Fortune tellers with hands like roots. Old sailors who have spoken more to the sea than to people. Beggars who have nothing left but stories no one wants to hear. And that's exactly who appeared now.

The men who had just kissed the captain's bottle laughed, roared, and sang filthy songs. But something else crept out from between their voices. A scratching sound. A whisper. A breath that wasn't from here.

"You're not sailing away," shrieked an old woman, kneeling with a sack of rags. "You're sailing into it! Into the sea that will never let you go!" She pointed a finger, bony and crooked like a rusted nail, directly at the captain. No one laughed. No one mocked. Instead, they spat on the ground, as if trying to wash away their fear. One threw a copper coin at her head, and she giggled as if he'd paid her a piece of hell.

A one-eyed helmsman—or what might once have been one—squatted next to a barrel. He blew into a conch, and the sound wasn't a song, but a groan. "The sea," he croaked, "has already chosen him. You are merely the lines in his ballad." The men shouted him down, beat on the barrel, ripped the conch from

his hand, and threw it into the water. But the groan remained, vibrating in the air as if the sea itself continued to sing.

Another, half-blind, murmured, "Black sails. Black sky. You will sail until the stars forget you." He didn't look at anyone, he only looked through us, as if we were already dead.

But no one wanted to hear it. Rum is louder than any prophecy. One sang: "The Dutchman's girl lies in the harbor, the Dutchman's heart lies in the barrel!" and the men joined in, roaring, clapping, and stamping their feet. The laughter swallowed the warnings, but they still hung in the air. Like smoke that won't dissipate.

I stood there and knew: Those voices weren't lying. They never lied. But in a world like this, lies are more convenient than truths. And the truth was simple: We had sold ourselves, and the buyer wasn't of this world.

The captain himself? He was listening. Completely silent. No protest, no curse, no mockery. He puffed on his pipe, blew smoke into the night, and smiled thinly. A smile that promised nothing but damnation. In that moment, I realized: Maybe the fortune tellers were right. Maybe he wasn't just a man. Maybe he had long since become a shadow.

The men continued to celebrate, as if they could drown their fear in their own noise. But somewhere in the harbor, deep in an alley, a crow cawed, and it sounded like a laugh.

The ship lay there like an animal holding its breath before leaping. Black in shadow, the planks riddled with cracks and salt, the sails still furled as if holding the air. No name on the bow, no salute, no flag, just the creaking of wood too old to be anything but teeth. It wasn't bigger than the other ships, but it had this weight in the air. You knew: if you stepped aboard here, you weren't just stepping onto a ship. You were stepping into something that was hungrier than all the men put together.

The men stumbled across the planks, one after the other. Some laughed, some swayed, some sang. All smelled of rum, fear, and the cheap comfort of the night. A few were pushed, half against their will, but no one offered serious resistance. The harbor had long since spat them out. They no longer belonged.

A few women stood on the quay, calling names no one wanted to hear anymore. "Come back, Jacob!" "Don't forget me, Hans!" – the voices sounded

like broken glass. The men didn't wave. Some spat, others turned away. Farewell is only for people who believe they deserve to return. No one here believed that.

The captain stood on the deck, his face in shadow, his pipe in his mouth. He didn't look like a man about to set sail. He looked like a judge who had already written all his sentences. His eyes were fixed on the sea, as if it had promised him something he would take. He didn't speak much. A single word, perhaps: "Sail." And that was enough.

The sails fell, black as night, torn by the wind, but they stretched like the lungs of a dead man being breathed new life into. The ship moved, slowly at first, then faster. The creaking of the planks was a growl, a suppressed laugh. The men ran, pulled on ropes, cursed, stumbled. But it was as if the ship was already sailing itself, as if it didn't need us at all.

The harbor behind us still stank, but it was shrinking, a shadow disappearing into the fog. Yet the stench remained. It crept after us, settling into our clothes, our skin, our lungs. No one said it, but everyone knew: You can leave the harbor, but the harbor won't leave you.

The old woman who had cursed us stood on the quay. She raised her arms as if to bless us, but her voice was a scream: "You're already dead!" A few men laughed, one spat into the sea. But deep down, they knew her words were heavier than any prayer.

The wind ripped us out. Seagulls screamed as if they had blood in their throats. The water rushed beneath us, cold, greedy, alive. And as the land disappeared, I looked back—one last look. The harbor stood there like a king who always wins. And I swore he was grinning.

Night fell, black as a shroud, and the lanterns on board flickered. No one spoke. Not even those who usually put every little thing into a song. Only the ship, breathing. And somewhere far out there, beyond anything that could be found with maps, hell already lurked.

And I knew: We hadn't set sail. We had sailed straight into the devil's mouth.

The bottle, the knife and the first corpse

There was nothing romantic about the night at sea. No starry sky, no moon to guide the way. Just black, wet darkness that jumped in your face like a stray dog. But the men on board had other things to do than admire the sky. The bottles went around, and they went around like a plague. Everyone took a sip, some two, most so many that they forgot their own names. The rum wasn't a drink. It was medicine. It was the only answer to the scratching in your chest, the whispering in your head, that gnawing feeling that you weren't on a ship, but in a box floating towards hell.

The deck was sticky from the spillage, the railing vibrated from the singing. One man bellowed a song about a whore in Cádiz, another about a barrel of gold he'd never seen, and the rest bellowed the choruses so off-key that even the seagulls shut up. A man with only one eye tapped the stump on a barrel to keep time, sounding like a heart that refuses to stop. Another danced, half-naked, his trousers tucked in, and stumbled so hard he almost fell overboard. They pulled him back, laughed, and handed him the bottle. "Drink, brother, or your soul will freeze." And he drank. Of course he drank.

The air stank of sweat, salt, rum, and fear. But no one spoke of their fear. They gulped it down, pushing it deeper into their stomachs with each gulp until it was nothing more than a dull burning sensation. It was as if the ship itself was passing the bottle around, as if the planks were whispering to us: "More, more, until you no longer know who your bones belong to."

I looked at them, these men. All their faces shone as if drenched in oil. Their eyes flickered, some with joy, some with madness. One laughed until he vomited, right over the railing. The sea took it, washed it back, and another shouted, "See, the sea is thirsty too!" – and they all laughed as if it were the punchline of the century.

But beneath the laughter lay a different sound. The creaking of the ship was deeper than usual, heavier. As if it were listening. As if it were absorbing everything: the screams, the laughter, the rum, the vomiting, and storing it all inside. Like a stomach that's never satisfied.

The bottle continued to circulate. One person picked it up and almost bit into the glass, so greedily that he tore his lip. Blood dripped onto the planks, mixing with the rum. No one noticed. But I swear, the ship vibrated. As if it had just had its first taste.

And in that moment I knew: This wasn't just a feast. This was a ritual. We weren't drinking because we wanted to. We were drinking because the ship wanted us to.

A ship is only as strong as its crew, they say. If that's true, then our ship was as strong as a pile of rotten potatoes. Each of them was a wreck, washed up somewhere, too lazy or too obsessed to sink.

There was**bark**, the giant. Two heads taller than most, with shoulders like a barn door and a face that looked like someone had tried to carve it with an axe. He spoke little, and when he did speak, it was barely understandable—too many missing teeth, too much of his tongue scarred. But he had these hands, as big as shovels, and everyone knew: If he grabbed you, you wouldn't get out.

Next to him sat**Lars the Fox**. Thin as a rope about to snap. His eyes constantly flickered, as if they were already searching for the next way out before the situation had even begun. He wasn't a fighter. He didn't strike with his fists. He struck with words. Always whispering, always lying, always with the look of a man who's stealing your shirt while telling you you look good in it.

Then there was**the boy**. Nobody knew his name. Maybe he didn't know himself. He was barely older than fifteen, with a voice that still squeaked if he spoke too loudly. But he rarely spoke anyway. Mostly he sat there, watching, and there was a knowledge in his eyes that made you nervous. As if he had seen things no one that age should see. One called him "the child," another "the mouse." But in the end, they didn't call him at all. He was just there, like a shadow no one could get rid of.

Havel, the Pole, was someone who always laughed. Even when blood flowed, even when he was bleeding himself. A grin, wide, crooked, with a golden tooth that sparkled, as if to prove he'd won before. He played cards, rolled dice, robbed women – always with that damned smile. And everyone wondered: Is he grinning because he knows something? Or is he just grinning because he's lost his feelings?

And then there was**crow**That's what they called him. A man with a black coat who always smelled of damp feathers. No one knew where he came from. He spoke with a voice like a grave. Whenever he opened his mouth, even the toughest sailors fell silent for a moment. He told stories of the sea, of ships that never returned, of men swallowed alive by the waves. And he did it with a calmness that was worse than screams.

Those were just a few. The rest were drunks, thieves, losers. Men who had spent more time in bars than with women, more time with knives than with tools. Each of them carried something on their backs: debt, guilt, or simply the boredom of rotting away in the countryside.

They were all laughing, drinking, vomiting, singing. And yet I sensed: These weren't men returning home. These were men who had been on their way for a long time – they just didn't know it yet.

Rum is like a dog: First it licks your hand, then it bites you in the face. And the rum on board bit you faster than you could say "cheers."

It started harmlessly.**Havel**The Pole had a hand too good at the card game, to be honest. Two aces too many, and his gold tooth flashed like a damned beacon. Next to him squatted**Lars the Fox**, who knew exactly when someone was cheating—because he did it all the time himself. He grinned thinly and pushed the cards back. "You have beautiful fingers," he hissed, "must be nimble." Havel laughed. Not because it was funny, but because he was always laughing. And that was exactly what drove Lars mad.

At the other table the giant began**bark**to loudly talk about a whore in Hamburg he had supposedly bought for three nights alone. Another, a dirty fellow with freckles and a nose like a potato sack, claimed to have known the same whore—and that she had laughed at Borke because he was as good in bed as a wet sack of flour. The laughter of those around him echoed across the deck, and Borke's forehead turned red like a cannon barrel just before firing.

Meanwhile, the boy, "the mouse," stumbled through the group. He just wanted to steal a piece of bread from the kitchen corner, but Havel snatched it from his hand, laughed, and bit into it himself. "A man eats first, boy." But the child's gaze—silent, empty, but full of hate—stunned the crowd to a halt. Only briefly, then the drinking resumed.

The rum did the rest. Words grew louder, voices sharper. Cards flew across the deck, dice clattered like bones. "Cheaters!" "Thieves!" "Shut up!" – the phrases echoed in the darkness, mingling with the creaking of the ship. The laughter turned into growls.

Then that one look happened. It always happens like that. No knife, no punch, no loud argument at the beginning. Just a look that lasted too long. Havel grinned at Lars, and Lars couldn't look away. Two dogs staring at each other until one dares to take the first bite. Rum dripped from their jaws, their fists

trembled, and hanging in the air was something that weighed more than all the barrels on board.

The sea around us was black as a burnt mirror. And the men's eyes turned just as black. This was no longer a feast. This was the foreplay. And everyone knew: things were about to get heated.

There's this moment when everything stands still before it crashes. So still that you hear your own heartbeat, as if you've suddenly come alive. That's exactly where we were. Two men, too much rum in their stomachs, too much hatred in their eyes.

Lars the Fox had his hands on the table, his fingers twitching like spider legs. Havel grinned, pulling cards toward him as if he'd won the whole damn world. The grin was the spark. Lars reached into his jacket, and then we saw it: the knife. Not a shiny, noble piece of steel like the ones in stories. No. A jagged blade, blunt at the tip, covered in stains that looked like memories of old throats. A tool that was more often found in stomachs than in loaves of bread.

The ship held its breath. The creaking of the planks fell silent for a moment; even the seagulls outside didn't screech. The knife lay there, among the cards, among the coins, and it glinted in the lantern light like a dirty tooth.

"Put that away, Lars," someone murmured. Another laughed nervously. But no one moved. Everyone just stared, as if the blade itself were deciding what would happen next.

Havel stopped grinning. Not out of fear. But because he knew it was no longer a game. He slowly laid down the cards, pushed back his chair, as deliberately as an animal that knows its next breath could be its last. His hand slid to the side, not quickly, not hastily—he didn't want to show that he was afraid.

The boy—the mouse—stood at the very back, eyes wide, mouth open. He had this look on his face, as if he wanted to run away, but his feet were nailed down. He saw the knife, and in his eyes was something no child should have: foreboding.

The knife still lay there, and the air crackled around it. It wasn't just a piece of iron. It was a decision. It was the promise that one of them would soon breathe less.

And somewhere in the darkness, deep in the belly of the ship, a beam creaked as if the ship itself had laughed.

It didn't happen like in the stories, where one person yells, the other parries, and everyone cheers. No, it happened as casually as a burp after too much rum. A twitch, a grab, a cut. And suddenly there was one less person on board.

Lars the Fox already had the knife in his hand before anyone noticed he'd taken it. A short, quick thrust—not even a particularly clean one. The blade slid under Havel's ribs as if it were penetrating a wet piece of wood. No scream, no curse, just a gasping "Hh—" like a strangled laugh. Then blood. Dark, thick, warm. It didn't spurt like in a theater. It flowed. Wide and slow, like tar running over the planks.

Havel staggered, his gold tooth flashing once more in the lantern light, then he fell, heavy as a sack of wet rope. The cards flew from his hand, fluttering across the deck as if they themselves were about to take flight. The others' laughter died, and so did the singing. Only the ship made a sound—a soft, sucking creak as the planks absorbed the blood. I swear to all the devils, the ship was drinking.

One laughed hysterically, much too loudly, for much too long. Another choked, covered his mouth, ran to the railing, and vomited into the sea. The mouse stood stock still, eyes wide open, as if he wanted to burn the image into his memory forever. And maybe he did. Maybe at that moment he was no longer a boy.

Lars stood there, the knife still in his hand, and didn't grin. No triumph, no jubilation. Just this empty twitch in his face, as if he didn't even know he'd done it. "He screwed up," he mumbled, almost apologetically. But no one answered.

The blood pooled in the cracks, and I swear I heard the wood sigh. As if it had been waiting for this. As if this were the first drop of many to come. The ship was thirsty, and now it knew what the taste was like.

One of the group took a step forward, wanting to say something, maybe shout, maybe fight. But he looked at the captain – and kept his mouth shut.

The men stared at Havel, who lay there, his eyes open, his grin frozen. His gold tooth sparkled one last time, and then it went out. Not a soul prayed. Not a hand closed his eyelids. Here, death was just another movement of the evening.

And somewhere out there, in the Black Sea, a wave crashed against the side of the ship, dull and heavy, as if it had applauded.

He didn't come running. He didn't scream. He didn't hit. The captain simply stepped forward, as if he already knew it would happen. His boots made no sound on the planks, and yet everyone heard his approach. The men moved aside like dogs who suddenly see the true ruler.

He stopped and looked at the dead man. Not a blink, not a twitch, not a word. Then his gaze wandered to Lars. The fox stood there, the knife still in his hand, blood dripping from the blade. His lips trembled as if he wanted to say something, some apology, some curse. But the words stuck. Because the captain's eyes had already pinned him down.

The captain raised his pipe to his mouth, pulled once, and blew out smoke that settled over the deck like a gray shroud. Then he spoke. "Murder is not a problem." His voice was quiet, but it cut deeper than any knife. "Murder is order. Murder is clean. But chaos..." He paused. The smoke still hung in the air. "I don't tolerate chaos."

He walked toward Lars, slowly, so slowly that it was like a judgment taking its time. Then he held out his hand. Lars hesitated, then handed him the knife. The captain took it, examined the blade as if reading the future. Then he threw it into the sea. A splash sounded like a full stop.

He grabbed Havel's body by the shoulders and pulled him to the edge. No one else moved, no one else helped. Everyone watched. The captain threw the body overboard, and the sea took it with a dull thud. It floated for a few seconds, the gold in its tooth glinting one last time in the moonlight. Then it disappeared.

"The ship takes what it needs," said the captain without turning around. "And you live as long as you stay out of its way." No roar, no thunder. Just this cold silence, which was worse than any threat.

Then he turned around and walked back into the shadows. The men breathed again, as if he had given them permission to do so. No one spoke anymore. No one laughed. Only the ship creaked, full and content, as if it had just taken a sip it had long waited for.

The night after the first blood was no ordinary one. It settled over the ship like a damp sack squeezing the air from one's lungs. The lanterns hung lazily from the masts, the light casting more shadows than brightness, and every shadow looked like Havel, the dead man who had just flown into the sea.

The men lay scattered on deck and in hammocks, some still with bottles in their hands, others with their eyes open, unable to sleep. No one spoke. The ship creaked, the wind whistled through the ropes, the water lapped against the side. Normal sounds, yes – but they didn't sound normal. They sounded hungry. As if the ship itself were nibbling away at the sea.

Then we heard it. First a splash, then a scraping. One of them jumped up and ran to the railing. "There!" he cried, "there he is, still floating!" We all looked. And there he was. Havel. The body wasn't just floating. It was lying there like a doll, pulled away from us but not sinking. The moon broke through the clouds, and damn it—its gold tooth was still flashing.

"He's not sinking," someone whispered. "He doesn't want to go down." Someone laughed, a hollow, nervous laugh that immediately stuck in their throats. And then—I swear—we heard a sound. Not a sea cry, not a seagull screech. A laugh. Muffled, bubbling, from the depths. "He's laughing," murmured the mouse in the voice of a child growing up too quickly.

A few men wanted to throw lines and pull him back. Others shouted at them to keep their hands off. The captain stepped forward, without haste, without anger. He looked at the water, and in his eyes there was no doubt, no twitch. "The sea has taken him," he said. "And if it doesn't swallow him, it has its reasons."

And at that very moment, a wave pulled the body away, faster, deeper, as if there were a hand down there trying to grab it. Havel's head disappeared, the gold blinked once more—then there was only darkness.

No one spoke anymore. No one sang. Only the bottle circulated again, more quietly this time, without laughter. Everyone drank as if they could wash the image away, but it remained. The sea hadn't let go of him. And we all knew: Havel wasn't gone. Not really.

Men shivered in their sleep in their hammocks. One screamed, another muttered prayers he didn't know. The mouse lay awake, its eyes wide open. And I… I still heard that laughter, somewhere beneath us, deep in the hull, as if the ship had swallowed it and wanted to sing it to us again.

And that night, under a black sky, with the first corpse in the belly of the sea, it became clear: We weren't just a crew on a voyage. We were part of something that had long since chosen us. Something that knew no turning back.

Women, rum and rotten teeth

The night was smooth as black glass. No stars, no moon, only a sky that looked like the nailed-down lid of a coffin. The sea was calm, too calm, as if it had forgotten itself. But nothing on board was quiet. Rum still flowed like an endless trickle down thirsty throats. The smell of sweat, smoke, and alcohol hung over the deck like an old carpet.

The men lay around, scattered among barrels, ropes, and cannons, like discarded rags. One snored, another sang, three gambled for their lives. And in the middle—always the bottle, the sacred center, the reason they were still breathing. They passed it around, always in a circle, like a prayer chain, but each "prayer" ended with a belch, a curse, or a laugh too loud for the night.

"To the women!" someone yelled, and the bottle lifted into the air. "To the damned women who sent us here!" Everyone laughed, but the laughter had an edge. Everyone knew: every woman was a reason why they were sitting here—or no longer. Some had run away from a marriage that was crushing them. Others from a whore who had drained them dry to the last copper. Still others—from women who had simply stopped saying their names.

The ship creaked as if it were listening. Every sentence, every laughter was swallowed by the planks, as if the wood itself were collecting the stories. And I knew: This ship thrived on our misery. It wanted to hear how broken we were. And it absorbed every drop.

The boy—the mouse—sat on the edge, knees drawn up, eyes alert. He didn't drink much, maybe a sip here and there. But he listened. He heard the men talking, boasting, lying, cursing. And perhaps he understood faster than the rest of us that women, rum, and rotten teeth weren't issues. They were excuses. Excuses to avoid admitting that we were already damned.

The sea was silent. But on deck, there was laughter, drinking, and mockery. It was the kind of night that knew only one direction: deeper and deeper.

It didn't take long for the bottle to loosen their tongues. Rum is like a rusty key—it unlocks everything you'd better keep locked. And the men started talking about women. About the ones they had. About the ones they'd lost. About the ones they'd never see again.

Borke, the giant who could barely manage three words at a time, muttered about a woman in Danzig who was supposedly as wide as two beds. "She held

me once," he said, his voice sounding like he was carrying a sack of stones. "Once. After that, I never found her again." Everyone laughed, but Borke's eyes betrayed that he wasn't joking.

Lars the Fox grinned thinly and told of a whore in Marseille who had supposedly stolen his heart. "I let her have it because it was too difficult for me." The laughter was filthy, but the truth hung in the air: No man gives up his heart willingly; it is taken from him.

Another, a Scotsman with a beard like a wet rope, boasted: "My wife left me because I drank too much." He grinned, raised the bottle and yelled: "Now I'm going to drink twice as much to prove her right!" Everyone roared, patted him on the shoulder, and he laughed along—but there was a hole in his eyes bigger than any barrel on board.

The dead man, Havel, from Poland, was still on everyone's minds, and someone whispered: "His wife? Didn't he say she cuckolded him? Maybe that's why he laughed so much, always laughed—so he didn't have to see her face." No one answered. It was rude to talk about dead people who hadn't even sunk properly yet.

Then came one everyone called "Toad" because he looked like someone had pulled him out of the mud. He told me that his wife had run off with a priest in Lisbon. "A priest!" he yelled. "He promised her God, and all I had was rum." This time the laughter was bitterer, more brittle.

And then there was the mouse. The boy. He said nothing. But as the men shouted, laughed, and boasted, he looked into the darkness, out to sea. His eyes were wide, and in them lay this knowledge: He may never have had a woman, and that was precisely why he already understood more than all the others. He knew: The stories weren't memories. They were wounds. And each of them still bled.

The ship creaked again, louder this time, as if it were listening. It absorbed the stories like blood, and I felt it tense, hungry, greedy. As if every woman mentioned was another nail in the coffin we all already shared.

Rum was the true captain. Not the man with the scar, not the sea with its hunger – it was the bottle that gave the orders here. Every grasp of it was an oath. Every sip was a prayer. And no prayer was ever answered, except with even more thirst.

They passed the bottle around like a host in a twisted mass. Their lips were chapped, their hands sweating, their throats burning. But they didn't stop. Rum made the wounds smaller, the laughter louder, the guilt more bearable. Rum was the brother who doesn't contradict you, the wife who doesn't leave you, the priest who doesn't ask questions.

"Rum cures everything," one shouted as he almost choked, the liquid dripping down his chin. The others laughed, yet they knew: He was right. Rum healed—until it killed. And that was okay. Because what else could you do, in the middle of a ship, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but your thoughts eating you up?

The bottle clattered across the planks as it made its way around, as if the ship itself were ensuring it would never be empty. But it did empty. Again and again. And then, as if by magic, the next one appeared. No one knew how many barrels still slumbered in the ship's belly. But there were enough to drown us all.

Some drank with fury, as if they were trying to grab life by the throat. Others drank with indifference, as if they were already dead. Still others drank with a gleam in their eyes that was dangerous—the gleam of men who, intoxicated, find the courage they would never have sober.

"Rum is like a woman," one yelled. "It makes you soft, it makes you hard, it drains you." The men roared, clinked glasses, and one nearly knocked another's teeth out simply because he hadn't drunk fast enough.

And as the laughter rolled across the deck, there was that creaking again. That deep, rich, contented sound that didn't come from the wind. It was as if the ship itself was drinking with every sip we took. It longed for us to destroy ourselves. And we did, willingly, smiling, drunkenly.

Rum wasn't a substitute. Rum was the new god. And each of us was its faithful, drooling dog.

There's nothing more honest than a mouth full of rotten teeth. You can lie about women, about gold, about fame. But when you laugh, your mouth reveals the truth. And on board this ship, every truth was brown, black, or long since forgotten.

Borke laughed, and three gaping teeth yawned like open windows in a house no one renovates anymore. "Ha!" he roared, "at least I don't bite into soup like

the damn fox!" Lars bared his own teeth—crooked, pointy, yellow, and one was so crooked it looked like a nail sticking out of the wall. "Better crooked than none," he hissed back.

Laughter rippled across the deck, fueled by the rum. One of the men spat out a tooth, just like that, with a spurt of blood, as if he'd just coughed up a piece of himself. He held it up like a trophy. "Look, brothers, I pay my rent in teeth!" The others' roars could have filled the sails. They clapped, they howled, one hit his head on the barrel simply because he didn't know what to do with the laughter.

Then came**toad**His face covered in pimples, his mouth like a grave full of rotten beams. He opened it wide and screamed, "Look! An organ only the devil plays!" His stumps of teeth glinted in the lantern light, and one broke off while he spoke. Just like that, crack, gone. He held his mouth, blood oozed out, and he grinned anyway. Perhaps because of that.

The laughter slowly turned roaring. It was no longer communal laughter; it was a snarl, a wheeze, a cough. Men slapped their thighs, toppled backward, and choked until the rum poured out of their noses. And all the while, they repeatedly showed their mouths, those crumbling cathedrals in which no god dwelled.

One of them suddenly pulled an old tooth out of his pocket—his own or someone else's, no one knew. He placed it on the table, next to the dice. "Bet," he said. They laughed, threw, and played. The tooth rolled like a bone, and it felt as if someone had replaced the dice of fate with it.

The ship creaked again, long and deep, and I swear: it was laughing along with us. The planks vibrated as if they could taste our rotten teeth. Maybe it didn't just want us to drink. Maybe it also wanted us toothless, mouthless, voiceless—until we were nothing more than jawbones clattering in the darkness.

And then I knew: Teeth are nothing but small monuments to the truth. And truth is not welcome here.

They say every journey begins with a woman. A smile you can't forget, or a look you never want to see again. For me, it was both, and both at the wrong time.

Her name was**Martha**, I think. Maybe her name was different, but Marta still sounds in my head like a stone falling on your chest. Her hair smelled of smoke and beer, her fingers of chalk and dust from wiping tables in the dive bar where

men died without anyone noticing. I was young, too young to know that love is nothing more than a bet where the knife always wins.

She laughed a lot. Not the kind of laughter that warms your heart, but the other kind—the kind that shows you're just another fool. I bought her beer, I bought her soup, I bought her everything I couldn't afford. And she took it, with a smile as cold as the harbor water. At night, I lay with her, and she was there, yes—but only physically. Her gaze was always elsewhere. As if I were just a piece of furniture she was using until something better came along.

One morning she was gone. No news, no trace, not even a final curse. Only my wallet was empty, and the mattress smelled of sweat that wasn't mine. I sat there like a dog whose bowl had been kicked out. Two days later, I saw her again – in the arms of a sailor, as big as a bear, her hands full of coins. She laughed. That laugh again. And I knew: I had never been more than a pastime.

So I did what everyone does: I drank. I drank so much the floor shook, and when it stopped shaking, I was standing on a ship. That was it. No big decision, no dream of gold or fame. Just a stupid heartbeat that had the wrong name in its mouth.

And when I hear men today talking about their wives, their whores, their lost loves, I know: We're all in the same boat—in the truest sense. Women are the reason we set sail. But none of us are going back.

I could lie and say I've forgotten Marta. But the truth is: I still remember her mouth. Her teeth, slightly rotten, slightly crooked, with a small stain in front. And yet... when I close my eyes, I see her laughing. Always laughing. And I know: the sea can wash away many things. But not that. Never that.

It started again with a joke. It always starts with a joke.

Toad, with his mouth like a grave full of rotten timbers, pointed around and babbled: "We're all the same, only some of us have a worse breath than others." Laughter, of course. Rum on their lips, spit in their beards, everyone slapped their thighs until one of them suddenly stopped laughing.

Bark, the giant, rubbed his fist over his tooth stump and growled: "Shut up, Toad. I don't stink, I bite." His voice was deep like cannon fire. Toad grinned, his gums bleeding, and spat a red lump onto the planks. "Bite? With what? With what's wrong with you?"

The mood immediately changed. Their laughter stuck in their throats, like fishbones. One of them started clapping nervously, then immediately stopped. Everyone knew: it was about to explode.

The bottle was still circling, but more slowly. Each grip was harder, each sip deeper, as if someone was trying to build up the courage to watch one of them kill the other.

Lars the Fox took advantage of the silence to add fuel to the fire. "Perhaps one of you should go to the blacksmith and have new teeth cast. Made of gold. Havel still had one." That was the mistake. Havel. The dead man. The one the sea didn't let sink.

The men fell silent. A heavy silence, thick as smoke, settled over the deck. Someone coughed as if he wanted to tear it apart, but it remained. Bark's eyes flashed, Toad wiggled his teeth as if he were about to spit them out.

"Don't speak his name," one growled from the darkness. "The sea is listening."

And indeed – the ship cracked, loudly, deeply, like a laugh.

Bark leaped to his feet, his fist as big as an anvil, and Toad didn't flinch. The men crowded closer, circling like vultures waiting for carrion. The air stank of rum, blood, and fear. Everyone knew: One more word, one more breath, and someone would fall.

And this time perhaps not as casually as before. This time it would be a massacre.

Bark stood there, his fists like cannonballs, and Toad grinned back bloodily, ready to open his mouth again. The men around him were like wolves, about to jump in. One held his breath, another whispered, "Now."

But before one of them struck, a shadow fell over the group. No storm, no gust of wind – just him. The captain. He wasn't loud. He wasn't fast. He simply stepped into the light of the swaying lantern, and the air became heavier, as if it had suddenly swallowed lead.

"Enough." One word. That was all it needed. It wasn't a command, not a shout. It was a fact. Like "the sea is salty" or "death is certain."

Bark lowered his fist, hesitantly, as if still checking if it was a trick. Toad spat out a piece of tooth and laughed, but the laugh was small, tiny, as if it no longer

belonged to him. Everyone else lowered their eyes. No one wanted to meet the captain's gaze, because they knew: When he saw you, he saw more than you ever wanted to know about yourself.

He puffed on his pipe, blew smoke around, and the smoke settled over the men like a second sail. "Women, rum, teeth..." he murmured, as if savoring the words. "All toys." He paused, letting the silence grow. "But soon you'll see that the sea wants more. It doesn't just take your teeth. It takes your flesh. Your voices. Your names."

The men froze. No one dared to laugh, no one dared to mock. Even the seagulls outside held their beaks for a moment.

The captain turned around and disappeared back into the shadows as if he'd never been there. And the ship creaked quietly, contentedly, like a hungry animal being fed.

No one spoke anymore. No one hit anyone anymore. Instead, the bottle was passed around again. But this time everyone drank as if they were at a funeral. And maybe we were. Our own.

The captain with the scar across his heart

He stood there like a damned rock in a storm. The planks creaked, the men swayed, the sea rumbled—but the captain didn't move. Not an inch. He wasn't tall in the traditional sense, not a giant like Barke. But he had this weight that forced you to raise your eyes. You could have stared into the darkness, into the lantern, into the sea—but in the end, your eyes always landed on him.

His body was hard, not from muscles built through training, but from scars, blows, and broken bones. A back like a plank, a neck like a rope, and hands that looked as if they could send you to the next world with a single grasp. His movements were calm, unruffled. No fidgeting, no stumbling. He walked across the deck as if he owned not only the ship, but the sea below.

And then there was his face. Weathered, angular, his skin tanned by wind and salt like leather worn a hundred times. One eye brighter than the other, both still. No sparkle, no warmth. Just that stillness, which silenced you more than any roar. He was the only man I ever met who grew louder when he was silent.

But most of all, everyone stared at his chest. Where his shirt opened, across his heart, ran the scar. Wide, deep, slanting, as if someone had tried to split him in half—and then forgotten to do the rest. It didn't look healed, not fresh, not old. It was all of the above at once. A cut that hadn't been thought through. A wound that doesn't heal because it's not meant to.

The men whispered, murmured, and stared. Everyone wondered: Who could leave such a mark, and how could a person still be standing afterward? But the captain stood. He breathed. He smoked. And with every puff of his pipe, it looked as if he were sucking the world itself into his lungs.

No one dared to ask him about the scar. It was as if the very question would bring death. But everyone knew: This scar told a story. A story that would sweep us all away.

No one knew his name. If he did, he had drowned long ago. But men who know nothing always start talking. And so everyone made up their own story about the captain—stories that said more about the teller than about him.

"He used to be an admiral," one slurred with a smile that had too many gaps. "A royal dog, finely dressed, until he made the wrong deal. Beat the devil at the gambling table, and the devil left him the scar. As a souvenir." The men laughed, but the laughter sounded nervous.

Another, the Scotsman with the beard like a wet rope, swore up and down that he'd seen the captain in a harbor battle before. "The man stood in the middle of the cannon fire, hoisting the sails while bullets thudded beside him. And then a chain struck him right across the chest. Anyone else would have been split in half, but he just lit his pipe and carried on." He raised a toast to the group, and no one dared to object.

Lars the Fox whispered in that voice that always made you shiver: "You think a sword struck him. I tell you: It was a woman. A woman who loved him so much she wanted to rip his heart out. With a dagger, in the middle of the night. But the heart kept beating. Not for her. For no one. Since then, it's beaten only for the sea."

The mouse listened, his eyes wide, and I swear he believed every story. Maybe he thought they were all true. Maybe they were.

Crow, the one in black, finally croaked: "You talk about swords, bullets, women. But I tell you: the scar isn't a cut. It's a seal. A sign. The captain has already died

once. He wrestled with death, and death let him go. Not willingly. But because he was stronger. Since then, he's walked with a wound that never heals. Because it's not meant to heal. So everyone can see: no one's going to get this bastard again."

The group fell silent. Even the drunks fell silent. The only sound was the creaking of the ship, deep, approving, almost like applause.

And I thought to myself: Maybe all the stories are false. Maybe all the stories are true. But one thing was certain—the scar wasn't an accident. It was an invitation. A warning. Or both.

The scar wasn't a line, a cut, a simple memory of a blade. It was a river that had once run right through him. From his left shoulder, diagonally down across his chest to just below his heart, so deep that one would swear he should have been dead long ago. But he stood. He stood and breathed, as if he himself had forced death to wait a little longer.

When his shirt flapped in the wind, it was clearly visible. A bulging, pale line, torn like an old rope that had been hastily retied. Some areas glistened as if they were still fresh. Others were darkly discolored, as if the blood had never stopped speaking. And every time he moved, the scar moved. It twitched, twitched, and was alive. Almost as if it were its own animal, living within his skin.

Once in the light of the lantern, I thought I saw it pulse. Very slightly, like a second vein beating in the wrong rhythm. Maybe it was just the rum in my skull. But I swear, the thing had its own heartbeat. And maybe, just maybe, it beat faster than his.

The men stared at her when they thought he wasn't noticing. And whenever one of them looked too long, the captain turned slowly and looked back. Then the other immediately lowered his eyes. No one wanted to be caught looking. Because everyone believed: If they caught you, the scar would eat you.

There was a rumor that he once tried to hide it. That he wore a buttoned-up shirt, the collar up, and his jacket sealed. But that never lasted long. At some point, the thing was back, exposed, visible, like a brand that needs air. As if it wanted to show everyone: Here, look. This is where you end up.

It wasn't a wound. It was a sign. A line that told him: "You no longer belong to the living, but you also don't belong to the dead." And when he smoked his

pipe and the smoke rose from his chest, it looked as if the scar itself were drinking the clouds.

I tell you, comrade: Anyone who carries such a line belongs to no country, no woman, no god. He only belongs to the sea. And the sea forgives no one.

His gaze was the real knife. No scream, no blow, no cannon could have done as much as that one pair of eyes. They weren't even particularly bright, not glowing, not flashing. They were simply still. Still as the surface of water just before a storm, and that's precisely why they were so dangerous.

When he looked at you, you felt as if you suddenly had an anchor in your chest. Everything became heavy: your breathing, your thoughts, even your damned bones. You could laugh, sing, roar as much as you wanted – but when he looked at you, you fell silent. Not because you wanted to. But because there was no other choice.

I've seen men beat whores like they were cattle, fighting three men at a time, falling asleep with knives in their fists. These same guys dropped their bottles when the captain so much as looked at them. They ducked their heads like whipped dogs.

His gaze was reminiscent of a judge who already has the rope in his hand before you hear your verdict. You knew he wouldn't talk for long. He would simply drop you. And the knowledge alone was enough to silence the men.

Even Bark, the giant who could crush the world with his fists, looked away when the captain stared at him. Toad, with his mouth full of stumps, giggled nervously, but only as long as he wasn't being looked at. Lars the Fox, whose words stabbed like daggers, remained silent as a child when the captain's eyes caught his eye.

And the strangest thing: It wasn't a look full of hate. Not a look full of anger. No. It was something worse. He looked at you as if he already knew how you would die. As if he had already seen your last seconds and was just waiting for you to follow suit.

I once tried to look at him for a longer time. I wanted to know if it only happened to the others. But I couldn't bear it. It was as if my head itself was being pulled down, as if the scar on his chest was forcing me not to look. I felt my own pulse, fast, restless, like a trapped animal.

Since then, I've known: His eyes are the true rudder of this ship. Not the rudder, not the sails. His gaze. He kept us all on course, whether we wanted to or not. And the course led straight to where no human being should ever have wanted to go.

The night was thick with stories. Men who could barely sit up straight began to talk—not about women, not about gold. About him. About the captain. Everyone had heard something. Some swore they'd seen him before. Others knew only the whispers from bars, where even the beer fell silent when his name was mentioned.

"I saw him in Brest," slurred one, a Spaniard with eyes like wet stones. "A fight in a harbor bar. Three men against him. They had chairs, knives, an iron bar. He stood there, smoking his pipe, and when they attacked him, he just stared. Just stared! One stumbled, another fell over the table, and the third ran out, screaming like a girl. He didn't even raise his hand."

Another, a Dutchman, swore by his mother: "He was in Amsterdam. He shut down an entire tavern. One look, and all the glasses stopped. Even the rats stopped nibbling. He took a girl without asking, and no one said anything. Not even her pimp."

Then Crow croaked: "You talk about bars, about rats. I saw him in a storm. A ship, half-torn to pieces, men screaming, water eating through the planks. There he stood at the bow, coat flapping, scar glowing in the flashlight. And he laughed. He laughed while the rest prayed. And the storm passed as if he had exhaled it."

The men fell silent. Rum dripped from beards, a pipe glowed in the corner, but no one laughed. Everyone knew: These weren't just stories. This was the stuff legends are made of—but legends that are too close, that will touch you if you're not careful.

And I thought to myself: Whether the stories were true or not didn't matter. He wasn't just a man with a scar. He was damned, and the world knew it long before we experienced it firsthand.

The strange thing was: every man saw something different in him. The captain was no longer a person; he was a mirror, and mirrors never lie—they only show you how ugly you really are.

To Borke, he was a father. A father he'd never had, one who doesn't give a hug, but only a slap to remind you you're alive. Borke stared at him like a dog used to being beaten and, for that very reason, remains loyal to the one who beats him.

To Lars the Fox, he was an executioner. He couldn't help but feel the rope around his neck every time he looked. Lars lied, stabbed, stole—but he didn't lie in front of the captain. He couldn't. Because that bastard's eyes saw through every lie like a knife through rotten flesh.

The mouse, the boy, saw something completely different in him. A brother. A shadow he could follow because he knew no other direction. Sometimes I watched the boy stand like the captain, his hands in the same position, his back ramrod straight. As if he were practicing to be like that himself someday. A ridiculous thought, yet somehow frightening.

Toad, on the other hand, once whispered—half drunk, half convinced—that the captain was the devil himself. "Look at the scar," he hissed, "that's the seal. The man isn't alive anymore. He's only alive because hell threw him out. Too filthy even for Satan." He laughed, but his laughter sounded like hiccups of fear.

And the others? Some saw a brother, others a judge, still others simply a guide. But in the end, it was all the same: No one saw the man anymore. Everyone saw what they themselves feared or longed for.

And me? I saw a mirror. I saw myself, only harder, older, damneder. And I knew: If I looked at it for too long, I'd go down the same path. Straight into nothingness.

So he became the center of the ship, without a word. Not through orders, not through whips. But because we all found in him something we hated—and therefore needed.

The scar spoke louder than all his words combined. It wasn't a memory, it was a promise. A cut across his chest, deep enough to kill anyone—but he stood there, smoking his pipe, as if he'd cheated death itself.

Sometimes, when the wind blew open the shirts, it lay open in the lantern light. A line, bulging and shiny, sometimes pale like an old scar, sometimes damp like a fresh wound. As if it refused to heal at all. As if it were opening up anew every day. And whenever the men saw it, they fell silent. Because they knew: No one walks around with a wound like that. Only a ghost does.

Some whispered that he had already died. Others swore he had never been alive. I myself thought: Maybe both. Maybe he died, and the sea spat him out again because it didn't want him. Maybe he was too tough, too dirty, too cursed for the depths.

Whatever the case, the scar was a sign. It meant: We are not sailing with a man. We are sailing with something that already knows death. And whoever sails with such a man will never return.

The ship creaked as if it had agreed with us. The sails flapped, the men ducked their heads as if unconsciously paying respect to the thing in its chest. No one spoke about it, but everyone felt it: His scar wasn't just his story. It was our future.

And as the pipe smoldered and the smoke rose up his neck, it looked as if the scar itself were drinking the vapor. As if it were thirsty. And I knew: it would get more. Much more.

Storm in the head, storm at sea

It didn't begin with thunder, nor with lightning. It began with the silence of the seagulls. The creatures that usually screech all day like children with slashed throats were suddenly gone. No more screams, no more flapping, nothing. Just the sea, flat as lead, and a sky that looked like an old man about to vomit.

The air smelled different. Heavy. Damp. A smell that wasn't simply of salt, but of something that hadn't happened yet. Like the smell of night when blood is about to be shed. The men felt it. They pretended to laugh, to play cards, to sit loosely on the ropes. But their hands were too tight. Their voices too loud. Everyone knew: Something was brewing out there.

The ship creaked differently. Not like a friendly pet, but like a hungry dog tightening its chain. The wood groaned as if it already knew what was coming. The mast vibrated softly, barely noticeable, but everyone on board felt it in their spine.

"Storm," one murmured, as if he'd just pronounced a sentence. Borke growled, "Screw the storm." But his eyes said something else. The mouse stood there, thin, silent, and looked up at the sky as if reading a script that only he understood. And I knew: The boy felt it more than any of us.

The captain stood at the bow. He said nothing. He did nothing. But just being there was enough. The wind began to play in the sails, gently at first, then harder, like a child losing patience.

And somewhere, deep in the belly of the ship, a sound was heard that no storm needs: a long, dark crack. As if the ship itself were saying:*Here we go.*

Even before the first drop fell, the storm was already raging in the men's skulls. Each of them carried their own thunder with them. The rum had only made it louder.

Bark sat on a barrel, chewing on a piece of rope like an animal, and murmured his mother's name. No one knew if she was still alive. Probably not. But he repeated the name over and over again, so quietly that he could barely hear it himself, as if he were defending it against the rumbling in the sky.

Lars the Fox was restless, his eyes darting back and forth like a rat searching for the exit. "Storms don't lie," he muttered, "storms never lie." Then he laughed, a sharp, barbed laugh that no one answered. He laughed because he couldn't help it. Because he knew he was going down, and he wanted to be the first to joke about it.

Toad crouched in the corner, his teeth chattering, whether from cold or fear, it didn't matter. He talked to himself, whispering, spitting, repeating: "The sea wants us, the sea wants us." A mantra, a litany worse than any prayer.

The mouse stood on the mast, his hands gripping the wood, his eyes wide open. He didn't speak. He didn't have to. There was more storm in his gaze than in all the drunken throats combined. A boy who already knew he would no longer be a child on this ship.

One of the older sailors, a Dane with a smashed nose, knelt and prayed. But his words were jumbled. One moment he called on Christ, then Mary, then some seafaring god no one had ever heard of. In the end, it was all the same: words lost in the wind.

Me? I heard Marta laughing in my head. That cold, sharp laugh that doesn't stop even when you cover your ears. I heard her through the wind, heard her even though she was miles away, perhaps long buried or in someone else's arms. But she was there, in my skull, sharper than any thunder.

So the storm raged within us before it began outside. And perhaps that was what the sea smelled. It tasted our madness, and it wanted more.

It came like a slap in the face. First the wind, suddenly, without warning—a scream through the sails, so loud that the men ducked their heads as if they were being whipped. Then the rain, not drops, but nails falling from the sky, hard, painful, as if the heavens wanted to skin us.

The sea rose, first a shove, then a fist. The ship groaned, creaked, and tilted, and the men stumbled across the deck like pieces in a game they didn't understand. One clung to the railing, another to a sack, a third fell, his face against the planks, and couldn't get up.

The thunder erupted, not in crashes, but in walls. Entire walls of sound that swallowed every scream, every curse. And in between the lightning—blinding, dazzling, as if the sky itself were tracing the captain's scar. Every flash of light made his chest glow like a damned seal.

"Tighten the ropes!" one yelled, but his voice was drowned. The men ran, grabbed for ropes, pulled, cursed, and slipped. The sails flapped like frenzied animals, the timbers creaked as if they were about to tear apart. One was caught by the swinging yardarm, a dull thud, and he rolled across the deck, semi-conscious.

The sea was no longer water. It was a mouth that opened and closed. Waves towered, as high as buildings, crashing over us, swallowing men up to the chest, tearing them free again. Every breath tasted of salt and blood, and no one knew if they'd get the next one.

I clung to a rope, my fingers numb, my body wet to the bone. Screams everywhere, fear everywhere, the taste of iron everywhere. But above all that, I heard something else—a deep, rumbling crack from the belly of the ship. The thing was alive. It was alive and enjoying every damn second.

And in that moment I knew: This wasn't just a storm. This was an attack. And we were the victims.

While the men screamed, cursed, prayed, and vomited, he stood there. At the bow, motionless, like a statue that had forgotten it was stone. The wind tore at his coat, the rain lashed his face, but he stood. No fear. No haste. Just this staring into the waves, as if he wanted to hypnotize them.

Lightning flashed, and each time the scar was visible. Across the chest, glowing as if freshly cut. In the bright light, it didn't look like flesh. It looked like a

damned rune. A mark not made by human hands. Some swore they saw it glow, red as iron in fire.

The men glanced at him amidst all the chaos. One was hanging halfway over the railing, water up to his neck, but his gaze was glued to the captain, not to the sea that was trying to kill him. Another, blood on his face from a blow from the yardarm, laughed hysterically when he saw him. "He's laughing with the storm!" he roared, even though the captain wasn't laughing. He was simply there. And that was enough.

I myself was holding onto a rope, my fingers numb, my bones burning, and I saw him. How he stood, how he breathed, how the thunder crashed around him, and he didn't even blink. And I swear, in that moment, I believed the storm wasn't against us. It was for him. A dance partner. An old duel between two old enemies that we happened to witness.

"It doesn't belong to us," murmured one, a man with a voice that was usually louder than any cannon. "It belongs to him." And he pointed out to sea. His hand trembled, but not from cold. From certainty.

The scar glowed in the lightning, the ship howled, the men clung on—and he stood there. Still. Like a damned seal. Like proof that we were no longer on a normal ship.

The waves no longer came one after the other. They came simultaneously, from all sides, as if they had decided to drown us like a pack of dogs attacking a piece of meat. The ship groaned, swayed, and creaked so loudly that you could have sworn it was about to break in half.

One of the sailors—an Irishman with hair as red as rusted iron—stumbled, lost his footing, and slid across the deck. He clung to a piece of rope, but a wave crashed over him, and he was gone. No scream, no final salute. Only the dull splash, and then there was only the sea, black and hungry.

"Man overboard!" someone yelled, but the wind swallowed the words. A few ran to the railing, held on tight, and stared into the fury of the waves. But there was nothing left to see. Only foam, only darkness. The storm had taken him, as casually as if he had just grabbed a piece of bread.

Another, a fat Frenchman, took a blow from a yardarm. A dull thud, a bone cracked, and he screamed. One leg hung crooked, useless. Two men pulled him

away and laid him between barrels, where he whimpered while the sea laughed at us.

The mouse stood there, clinging to the mast, his eyes wide open. He looked out, perhaps searching for the redhead the sea had swallowed. But he found nothing. Only darkness. And maybe, just maybe, he heard the laughter we all ignored.

The ship tore at its ropes, the sails flapped, the rain lashed, and we knew: the sea wanted more. It wasn't satisfied. It would continue to devour us until we were nothing but splinters of wood and bones.

The captain turned his head, just briefly, a glance around. Not a word. But there was something in his eyes that made us all freeze: He had accepted the price.

Thunder didn't just strike the sky, it smashed into people's skulls. Every flash of lightning ripped through not only the clouds, but also the men's heads. And from the cracks, things crept out that no one wanted to see sober.

Toad was the first to scream. "Do you see that?! Do you see it?!" He pointed at the water, and yes, there was something. Faces. Dozens, hundreds, formed from foam, laughing toothlessly, eyes like black holes. They surfaced, dissolved, resurfaced, ever closer. Hands of spray grabbed the planks, fingers of water that clung and slid.

The Dane, who had just been praying, began to cry. "They're coming for us!" he sobbed, "They're coming for us!" Then he suddenly giggled, hysterically, like a child. He tore off his shirt, spread his arms, and screamed into the wind: "Come! Come!" A wave slammed him back against the mast, and he collapsed unconscious.

Bark roared into the storm as if he could drown it out. Every blow of his fist against the railing was like a final, futile protest. Blood was running from his nose, but he was laughing. "More!" he screamed, "more!" and I swear, the sea answered with a blow that nearly knocked him off his feet.

Lars the Fox lay on all fours, his eyes wide open, his mouth full of salt. "The bones!" he screeched. "I see the bones!" No one understood which bones he meant, and no one wanted to ask.

And I saw Marta. Her face in the water, clearer than ever before. Her eyes, that cold laugh, that damned memory. She called my name, but her lips didn't

move. It was the water speaking. I swear, a wave lifted, formed its shape, reached out to me. I almost let go of the rope, almost... but then a flash of lightning yanked me back to the present. Just the sea. Just foam. Just madness.

The ship groaned as if it felt everything with us. Every beam trembled, every nail sang. And somewhere, between the thunder and the waves, I heard laughter. Not from the men. Not from Marta. From the ship.

And then—silence. No seagull, no thunder, no scream. Just the sea, smooth as a sheet over a corpse. The sky opened, not friendly, but empty. Gray, endless, as if it had just vomited out everything it contained and was now too tired to say anything else.

The men hung from ropes, lying on deck, panting like beaten dogs. One was crying softly, another was still laughing, hysterically, for no reason. Barke was bleeding from his nose, grinning broadly, the mouse clung to the mast as if he would never let go. Lars the Fox stared into the void, his pupils dilated, as if he'd seen hell—or worse, himself.

No one spoke of the redhead the sea had taken. Nor of the Dane lying unconscious in a puddle. We all knew: the sea had helped itself. And it was still hungry.

The ship creaked, long and full. It wasn't broken. Quite the opposite. It was stronger. As if it had consumed the storm itself. Some looked at each other, whispering that the wood in its belly sounded drier, firmer, more alive. As if it had soaked itself full, not with water—with us. With our screams, our fear, our blood.

The captain stood at the bow, his pipe in his mouth, as if nothing had happened. His coat clung to him, his scar still wet. He didn't look at us. He didn't even look at the sky. He stared at the sea as if waiting for it to speak again.

No one dared to speak to him. No one dared to say a word at all. We drank rum from soggy cups, every sip tasting of metal. And we knew: the storm wasn't just weather. It was a test. And we hadn't passed. We were still alive, yes—but something had remained on board. Something that hadn't been invited.

Night came again, swiftly, like a sack over my head. And in the darkness, between the wet planks, I swore I heard footsteps. Not ours. Not the captain's.

Something else was walking with me. Invisible, but heavy enough that the wood creaked beneath it.

We had survived the storm. But since that night, everyone knew: survival was just the beginning.

The plague on board

It started small, like everything that eventually consumes you. No thunder, no carnage, just a cough. A shitty cough that sounded like someone was spitting out pieces of their own lungs.

The first was a Portuguese man, a thin fellow with arms like ropes, but eyes so tired he looked as if he'd already lived through a thousand storms. He sat in the corner, a blanket over his shoulders, wheezing so hard everyone's stomachs churned. The men laughed at first. "Too much rum, too little woman," one roared. "Or the sea pissed water down his throat." The Portuguese man grinned weakly and spat on the planks—a dark, sticky lump, red and black. The laughter stopped abruptly.

His breath stank. Not of alcohol, not of rotten teeth. It was a sweet stench, heavy, like rotting flesh in the sun. The rats that usually swarmed around everywhere kept their distance. And when rats keep their distance, you know something's wrong.

Another, the Frenchman with the broken leg, began to tremble. First only at night, then during the day as well. He sweated as if he were standing in a fire, his shirt was dripping, and yet his teeth chattered. "Cold," he whispered, "so cold." Someone placed a blanket on his chest, and he immediately threw it away. "Too hot! It's burning!" He screamed as if someone had thrown him into the fire.

The men were still laughing, or at least trying to. "Just a fever," said Borke, the giant, and slapped him on the shoulder so hard he almost choked. "It'll pass." But his voice didn't sound convinced.

I stood there, smelled the stench, heard the choking, saw the blackness in their faces. And I knew: This won't go away. This isn't rum. This isn't weakness. This is something else.

And somewhere in the belly of the ship there was a long, satisfying crack, as if the wood had just grinned.

It took less than two days for the laughter to die down. At first, it was just sayings and jokes to smother the fear. "A little cough doesn't make a coffin," one said, and the others roared. But while he was still laughing, he himself began to wheeze.

One by one, they got it. First the weak ones—the Frenchman with the leg, the Portuguese with the blanket. Then the strong ones, who always screamed the loudest. Borke coughed blood onto the planks, wiped it away with his hand, and pretended it was just red wine. But we all saw how his eyes turned yellow, how his breath smelled sweet.

The stench crept through the ship. Not the usual harbor stench of sweat, rum, and shit. No, this was different. Sharper. Heavier. Like a dog tearing at a dead animal that's been lying there for days. The men could feel it in their throats, even the healthy ones. They drank rum like water, just to mask the taste, but it didn't help. The stench remained.

The laughter died silently. First, they stopped making jokes about the sick. Then they stopped talking altogether. Only the coughing remained. Day and night. Loud, dry, wet, choking. It was like a new language on board, one everyone understood, but no one wanted to speak.

Lars the Fox began to whisper: "It's not a fever. It's the sea creeping inside us." He looked into everyone's faces, as if already searching for the signs. And the others backed away when he spoke.

Toad rubbed his skin raw, as if he could scratch the disease out of himself. "I don't want it!" he shrieked, "I'll give it back!" He ripped open his shirts, his chest covered in red welts, and coughed blood onto the deck, which immediately soaked into the wood.

And the mouse, the boy, stood there, silent, with wide eyes. He didn't cough. Not yet. But he looked as if he understood: We were all already sick. Even those who were still breathing like before.

And so the laughter turned. First into silence. Then into whispers. And finally into screams.

The ship was no longer a lifeboat; it was a fucking incubator. Every beam, every rope, every hammock was saturated with coughing, sweat, and blood. The air

below deck was so thick you could cut it, and even then, it would have crept down your throat. A sweet stench, heavy as rotten sugar, hung everywhere.

The rats were no longer running across the ship. They kept their distance. I saw them sitting in the shadows, their eyes glowing, but they didn't dare come too close. Even the filthy creatures didn't want to eat what was dying here. That said it all.

The hammocks swayed, not to the rhythm of the sea, but to the rhythm of the bodies lying in them, wheezing. Every breath sounded like a rusty hinge. Some coughed so hard they vomited – a black slurry that looked like oil. Others lay still, their lips dry, their eyes glassy, and you knew they'd never jump up again if someone yelled "Storm!"

The water in the barrels was stale and smelly. Some drank it anyway, others preferred to drink rum until they passed out. But rum doesn't cure the plague. Rum only makes it louder.

The noise was worse than the roar of cannons: coughing, choking, sobbing, cursing. One man prayed incessantly, another sang a children's song hoarsely until his voice was gone. Everything blended into a chorus that the ship absorbed.

And the ship... it creaked differently. No longer the old sighing of wood in the wind. No. It was deeper, more rhythmic. Like a breath. Like an animal lying listening beside the sick, waiting for them to finally be quiet. I swear, in the nights I heard it giggling. Not loud, not clear. But there was something.

The plague wasn't just on board. It was in the planks, the rigging, in every damn nail. The ship itself was sick—and it liked it.

He didn't die with a scream. He didn't die with a fight. He died like an old piece of wood that simply snaps.

The Portuguese man who had coughed first lay in the hammock, his face gray as ash, his eyes already half over. His chest rose and fell, each time a spasm, as if he were lifting mountains just to catch his breath. The men stood around him, no one too close, no one too far away. One held his nose, another pretended not to look. But everyone stared.

He wheezed, spat, and laughed briefly, an ugly, brittle laugh that was immediately drowned in a cough. Black liquid ran from his mouth, over his

beard, and dripped onto the planks. And the wood greedily absorbed it. I swear, the boards gleamed afterward, as if they'd needed it.

Then he stopped breathing. No drama, no thunder. Just gone. His eyes were open, his mouth half-open, as if he wanted to say one last word – but nothing came. Only silence.

Borke stepped forward, grabbed him by the legs, and pulled him out of the hammock as if he were a sack of potatoes. No prayer, no blessing. Just a "Get him out." Two men lifted him up and brought him to the railing. One muttered, "God rest his soul," but the captain snorted, and that was that.

They threw him into the sea. A dull splash, then silence. The sea usually takes its victims immediately. It pulls them under, makes short work of them. But the Portuguese man stayed on top. Floating on his back, his mouth open, his eyes fixed.

"Get down, damn it!" someone cursed, as if the dead man could hear him. But he didn't sink. He lay there as if the sea didn't want him. The waves pushed him back against the side, again and again, dull, like a knocking. As if he wanted to get back on the ship.

The men screamed; one tried to help him with the boat hook, to push him away. But the water held him, played with him. Finally, after an eternity, a wave pulled him away. Slowly, hesitantly, as if reluctantly.

"Even the sea spits him out," muttered Lars, pale as chalk. No one objected.

And I heard the planks creaking beneath my feet – full, content, as if the ship itself had just grinned.

It wasn't long before the mistrust was worse than the coughing. Men moved away from each other like dogs that no longer wanted to sniff each other. No one wanted to sleep next to a sick person, no one wanted to drink from the same jug, no one wanted to chase the same rat.

One man grabbed the rum bottle that was being passed around, and the next man snatched it from his hand. "You're sick," he hissed, "you give us your mouth with every sip." The first man jumped up, the bottle between them as if it were a heart. They wrestled, they screamed, until Borke intervened and struck them both down with one blow. He spat on the ground and roared, "Rum is the only thing we have left! Whoever shares this shares their life, sick or not!" But his voice sounded hollow, even to him.

Whispers crept across the deck. One claimed the disease was coming from the captain's scar. "It rots from him, through all of us," he murmured. Another swore the ship itself was contaminated, the planks covered with plague. "Every breath brings it in deeper."

Toad began to mark himself off with ropes. He lashed a rope around his hammock, yelling at anyone who came too close. "Not here! Not here!" His voice was ragged, his face glistened with sweat, and he coughed blood into the rope, which immediately turned black.

Lars the Fox skulked around, looking into everyone's eyes as if trying to detect the plague within. "You're already dead," he once hissed in a man's face. "You just don't know it yet." The man knocked him down, but no one helped Lars up. No one helped anyone anymore.

And the mouse—the boy—became quieter. He didn't speak at all anymore. He just stood there, his eyes wide, his fingers curled around the wood. He didn't cough. Not yet. But the men looked at him as if they trusted him less than the sick. Because he was healthy. Too healthy.

So we became a pack tearing ourselves apart. No one trusted each other. Every step, every breath was suspect. And the plague laughed softly in the darkness.

The stench was unbearable. Sick sweat, blood, shit, and that sweet smell, as if sugar were boiling in decay. Men held cloths over their mouths, others stuffed tobacco up their noses just to keep from vomiting. And then he came. The captain.

He descended the stairs to the lower deck, step by step, calmly, like a judge who already knows what the verdict will be. The men backed away, even the dying ones. As if his presence carried more weight than the plague itself.

He stopped, looked at the Portuguese, who was dead, at the Frenchman with the broken leg, who was wheezing, and at the others, who hung between life and decay. His eyes moved slowly, from one to the next, without pity, without hatred, without any flicker. Only this cold affirmation:*That's how it has to be.*

Then he spoke, his pipe between his fingers, as if he were just strolling through a brothel: "He who dies, dies. He who lives, sails."

The words fell heavily into the stifling air. No consolation, no curse, no promise. Just a law. He turned, looked at the healthy people standing there with pale faces. "Don't panic," he murmured. "Paniced men stink faster."

Borke lowered his head, Toad trembled in his hammock, Lars bit his lip until blood flowed. But the mouse—the boy—stared at him. For a long time. Too long. And for a moment, their eyes met. I swear, there was something. A sparkle in the captain's eyes that almost looked like recognition. Only briefly, then it was gone.

He turned around and climbed back on deck as if nothing had happened. But his words remained. Simple, harsh, final:*Whoever dies, dies. Whoever lives, sails.*

And that's when we knew: disease meant nothing on this ship. The plague wasn't an enemy. It was just another tool.

After a while, we stopped talking about "illness." The word lost its meaning. It wasn't an enemy creeping in. It was a new sailor, quiet, patient, ugly like the others—only hungrier.

The plague had its place, like everything else here. Next to the rum barrel, next to the cards, next to the knives. It was always there, whether you were asleep or awake. It coughed along, it sang along, it laughed along, only more quietly. Some even called it by name, as if it were a companion: "The Black One," "The Sweet One," "Our New Whore." One toasted the void and murmured, "To you, sister."

The men stopped pushing the sick away. They knew: sooner or later, everyone would cough. So they moved closer, drank from the same cups, coughed into the same wood. The ship absorbed everything, every wheeze, every trace of blood. It vibrated at night as if it had a fever.

The sea took the dead, yes. But not quickly. It held them afloat, let them drift, as if to remind us: Look, he was one of you. Now he belongs to me. Every new body that fell made the waves calmer. As if we weren't passengers, but offerings.

And so the plague became part of the crew. No longer a stranger. It was one of us. It drank with us, it spat with us, it cursed with us. And no one was surprised, as if it had never been any different.

I swear, sometimes I heard them laughing. Not humanly, not loudly. More like the sound of wood cracking. A giggle that came from the planks. As if the ship itself had welcomed the plague, like an old friend.

And in the darkness, I thought: We weren't sailing only with men. Not only with the captain. Not only with the scar. Now we were sailing with her too. And she had more patience than all of us combined.

Curses are harder than iron

After the storm and the plague, the ship was quieter. But not the normal silence you get when everyone's drunk and asleep. It was the kind of silence that comes when everyone is waiting for something. For a sound. For a sign. And the signs came.

At first, it was small, almost inconspicuous. A rope, fresh from the shipyard, snapped in the middle of the night without anyone pulling. There was a loud bang, as if someone had fired a shot, and the men jumped, their eyes wide. But there was no wind, no weight. Just the rope, severed, as if it had grown tired of itself.

A lantern went out, even though there was no breeze. The flame died down, and the wick still glowed as if a cold tongue had extinguished it. The room smelled of metal, not oil.

A dice fell from the table, rolled across the planks, spun, and stopped on an edge. Not on a number—on the fucking edge. The men stared at it, no one touched it, until finally one of them got drunk enough to kick it into the sea.

The stories began immediately. Everyone knew one: about a ship that never landed again; about a captain who cursed the sky and only sailed in storms; about a sailor who cursed a priest at sea and was eaten alive by seagulls the next day.

"This is the kind of ship," one murmured, "the kind that never comes home." Another laughed—too loud, too long. "Screw the curses," he cried, "it's just wood and iron." But at that very moment, the beam next to him cracked, so deep and hard that he jumped in shock. The men looked at each other. No one was laughing anymore.

From then on, the words hung heavier in the air. Every sentence was like a loaded gun. And we knew: Here, on this ship, curses weren't just spit. They were nails. And nails last longer than ropes.

Sailors aren't made for silence. When the sea scares them, they curse. When the sails tear, they curse. When a rat steals their bread, they curse. A curse is the only thing they have left when everything else deserts them. And so they began to roar back.

"By the devil!" one man shouted as a rope whipped over his shoulder. "He'll get me if he dares!" The laughter that followed was nervous, brittle – and immediately cut off when, half an hour later, the man slipped in the darkness and fell overboard. No scream, no waving. Just the sea, silently swallowing him. No one said "by the devil" afterward.

Another spat on the deck and shouted, "If the plague is a sailor, I'll drink with it until it pukes!" That same night, he lay gasping in his hammock, black spots on his neck. He didn't die immediately, but everyone knew: The curse had heard him.

Even the smallest remarks carried a heavy weight. "Screw the storm," one muttered in his sleep. The next morning, he was found with a broken neck, having fallen from his hammock, even though the ship was calm.

The men quickly realized: words stuck here like pitch. Once spoken, they wouldn't go away. They hung in the air, heavy, damp, poisonous. You couldn't take them back. They settled into the wood, the sail, the sea—and eventually, they returned, with interest.

Still, they couldn't stop. Men without curses are like knives without blades. So they kept barking, sometimes louder, sometimes quieter, always afraid that the ship was listening. And it was. Every nail, every beam vibrated when someone cursed. As if the wood were absorbing the words to spit them out later.

Rum helped loosen the tongue. But every sip was a risk. Every sentence was a knife that could be turned against oneself. And slowly the men realized: Here, on this ship, every word was a judgment.

Sailors usually rely on iron. Nails, chains, anchors, cannons—iron holds when nothing else holds. It's the last hope against wind and water. But on this ship, iron was worthless.

The nails rusted faster than they could be hammered in. Red grease ran down the planks like blood. Chains that had been taut yesterday suddenly slackened, as if they had lost their strength. Someone pulled on one, hard, with calloused

hands – and it broke. Just like that. No splintering, no bang. It crumbled, silently, as if it had never been strong.

The cannons stood there like lame dogs. Someone wanted to oil them, polish the barrels. But the iron felt cold, too cold, as if it had forgotten how to fire. The man swore it trembled beneath his hand, as if it were afraid.

And as the iron weakened, the words stuck. A curse, once spoken, stuck to the ship like pitch. You could swap out boards, replace ropes, replace iron—but the words remained. They didn't rot, they didn't rust. They nailed themselves firmly into the air.

The men noticed. One spat on the planks and said, "Fuck the sea." The next morning, the entire area stank of rotten seaweed, as if the sea itself had crept through the cracks. The iron in the nails was blackened and brittle. But the words were still there, hanging heavy in the mind, no one could forget them.

"Curses are harder than iron," murmured Lars the Fox, his eyes flickering. "Iron crumbles. Words remain." No one objected. Not even Bark, who usually had a fist for every spell.

And I thought to myself: The ship was no longer made of wood and iron. It was built of curses. And they held up better than any damned metal.

It was an evening that began with rum like any other. The men roared, coughed, and laughed at their own missing teeth, while the plague continued to infest the ship. But one man had too much on his mind, too much in his throat. Toad.

He lost at dice. Again and again. And Lars the Fox grinned at him so narrowly it looked like a cut. Finally, Toad tipped the cup over, the dice clattered across the planks, and he screamed, "Cursed be you, fox! Cursed until your blood drowns you!"

At first, the men laughed, roared, and toasted. But the laughter quickly died down. Lars didn't stop coughing. First quietly, then harder, then choking. He gasped for air, blood spurting from his mouth like black wine. He fell to his knees, wheezing, his face red, his eyes wide.

"The ship is listening!" someone shouted, and suddenly everyone fell silent. Only Lars wheezed, choked, and spat dark lumps onto the planks, which they immediately absorbed. Finally, he toppled over, his arms cramped, his mouth wide open. Dead.

No one laughed. No one cursed. Everyone stared at Toad. He sat there, his eyes wide open, as if he himself hadn't believed his words could become flesh. "I... I didn't mean it," he stammered. But it didn't help. The words had been spoken, and they had taken their toll.

From then on, we all knew: A curse was no longer just spit and sound. A curse was iron. Iron that cut, that nailed, that killed. Every sentence could be a gallows, every word a rope.

And the ship cracked. Deep, heavy, contented. As if it had written its own death.

The captain had observed the scene. Not a sound, not a twitch, not a surprise, as Lars the Fox collapsed onto the planks, gasping for breath. He just stood in the shadows, his pipe between his teeth, the smoke heavy as fog. The men looked at him, as if hoping for a verdict. But he didn't speak. He didn't have to. His silence was a real shock.

He let the men stew in this fear for two nights, in the silence where no one dared to utter a word too grand. Then the moment came. A night, windless, the sea smooth as if it were holding its breath. The men sat on deck, whispering at most, one coughing, another choking. And then he spoke.

"Rope." Just that word. Nothing more.

As soon as they were out, there was a loud bang. A rope, as thick as an arm, suddenly ripped right through, flying through the air, whipping like a living thing. One of the men took the blow, across his face, blood spurted, teeth flew. The ship creaked, vibrated, and then silence again.

The men stared at the captain. Not a sound, not a breath. He sucked on his pipe, blew out the smoke, turned around, and left.

From then on, no one knew: Was it coincidence? Was it the sea? Or was it him? But everyone knew: When the captain spoke, the ship listened. When he spoke a word, the wood, the ropes, even the air obeyed.

And so he became more than a man. He became the mouth of the ship. The only one who could channel the curses instead of being consumed by them.

The men spoke even less after that. But when he spoke—even if it was just a single, small word—they saw in it the power of a law that no iron, no storm, no cannon could ever have given.

After Lars' death and the broken rope, language itself became an enemy. The men who usually covered everything with curses—hunger, fear, desire—fell silent. It was as if a rope had been placed around each man's throat.

Conversations died out. Once, they had roared, laughed, mocked, and argued, as if words could tear open the heavens themselves. Now, at most, they murmured, quietly like confessors, fearful that the ship was listening. Even simple phrases like "Give me the rope" were avoided. Instead, they pointed, nodded, and raised their fists. A pack of dogs communicating only with growls and gestures.

The nights were worse. Usually, rum and lies filled the darkness. But now, there was only the creaking of the planks and the wheezing of the sick. And sometimes, if someone cursed too loudly in their sleep, they never woke up.

The men began to avoid words like rats avoid light. Even while drinking, they only raised their cups and toasted silently. At one point, one muttered, "To us!" – and an hour later, he toppled over, his neck broken. After that, they toasted only in silence.

The only voice that still cut freely through the air was the captain's. When he spoke, the ship listened, but it never punished him. It obeyed him. And that made the silence even more difficult. For while we all swallowed our tongues, his voice seemed to carry more weight than the roar of cannons.

It was as if we had ceased to be men. Words make you human. Without words, we were just bodies. And bodies are easily broken.

In the end, we all realized: the ship wasn't built of wood, iron, and sails. It was a damned sounding board. Every curse, every word that flew across the planks, nailed itself into the frame like a new beam.

You could hear it. At night, when the men were silent, it creaked in the darkness. Not the normal sigh of a ship riding waves. It was an echo. A murmur. As if the wood were repeating the words we'd long wanted to forget. Quiet, scratchy, like voices from a hole beneath the planks.

One swore he had heard his own curse that night, the one he had uttered three days earlier. "Cursed be this sea!" – and there it was, whispering, spoken by the ship itself. He whimpered, drank himself unconscious, but the next day his hair was gray.

The iron fell apart, nails rusted, chains came loose—but the words remained. They didn't rot. They didn't rust. They sounded, over and over again, as if the ship wanted to chew them until they became part of its body.

It was as if we were sailing on a corpse whose bones were being reassembled with each curse. And each of us was the gravedigger, shoveling the earth on top.

Curses are harder than iron. Harder than bone. Harder than all of us combined. And on this ship, they were the very sail that propelled us forward.

We were no longer sailing on wood. We were sailing on damned words. And every one of them demanded blood.

The bargain with the devil

After the curses, the air remained thick as old rum. Words became rarer, and when someone did speak, the planks could be heard creaking afterward, as if the ship were repeating every damned syllable. So the men remained silent. But in silence, something always grows. It rots, it ferments, and eventually, it erupts.

It began as a whisper. "The devil's sailing with us," murmured one, half drunk, half convinced. Another laughed—not loudly, just a tremor in his throat—and whispered back: "Sailing? He's the one who's steering the ship." No one objected.

It was most clearly heard at night. One man wheezed in his sleep, as if haggling in his dreams. One man whimpered, begged, promised something to someone. Not God. Not the sea. Someone else. Someone who listens when you're too weak, even to curse.

The mouse, the boy, once sat next to the railing, his legs dangling over the black water. He said nothing, but his eyes were wide, staring deep into the sea, as if listening to a voice only he could hear. And I swear, for a heartbeat, he smiled. A boy who never smiled otherwise.

The lanterns flickered in the silence. Not from the wind. But like candles in a church where a decision is being made. And I knew: We had left the curses behind us. Now came the deal.

It wasn't long before the first people spoke of temptation. Not out loud, never in a group. Always in whispers, with eyes that flickered nervously like candles on a train.

The Scotsman with the beard like a wet rope was first. He woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, his hands shaking. "He promised me something," he whispered, as if afraid the air itself would betray him. "Land. A farm. Cows. A hearth with a fire always burning." He laughed briefly, a hoarse, broken laugh. "And a wife who never leaves." The men listened in silence, no one laughing. Because everyone knew: This sounded too real to be just a dream.

Another, a Dutchman, swore he saw the water. "There was a face. It winked at me. Black eyes, white as salt around the mouth. It looked like me, only better fed. It said I just had to say the right word—and everything would be mine."

Toad, with his stumps in his mouth, giggled nervously. "I heard him too. He said I should just give him my tongue. Just my tongue. Then he'll talk for me. And he talks better." His eyes sparkled, as if it were no joke at all.

The mouse was silent. But he looked as if he understood every damn sentence. As if he were listening to something the others weren't even aware of.

The temptations came creeping in, like rats. Everyone heard them differently. But in the end, they all boiled down to the same thing: Every man suddenly had something to offer. Every man considered what he could sell if the price was only survival.

And I knew: Nothing on this ship was random anymore. Even the voices in the dark were part of the game. And we hadn't even started rolling the dice yet.

Hunger came quietly but mercilessly. At first, it was just smaller portions. One less piece of bread, one shorter sip of rum. Then it was rations that smelled more of air than a meal. And eventually, you could hear it everywhere: the growling of stomachs, louder than any prayer, deeper than any curse.

The barrels of rum were half empty, some already empty. The men tipped out the last drops with their tongues, licking the wooden rims as if there were still a drop of salvation left. Bread became hard as iron, and fish was only available if someone found a few bones in the net. But mostly there was nothing. Just water, salt, and the occasional dead bird, which they devoured raw, without question.

In this emptiness, this growling, readiness grew. Men who had previously joked around now looked at you as if you were a piece of meat. One murmured, barely audibly: "I'll sell anything for a bowl of soup. Anything." And we all knew he didn't just mean his shirt or his knife.

The Scotsman with the beard began talking loudly to someone no one could see. "Just a little grain, just a little cheese, and you'll have it," he muttered, his eyes fixed on nothingness. "Take what you want, just let me eat."

The plague made it worse. Sick stomachs screamed louder, sapping every ounce of strength. Men lay there, shivering, begging for water, for rum, for anything. And in this desperation, any promise was welcome. Even if it came from below.

The sea smelled it. Or the devil. Or both. We no longer knew the difference. But we knew: hunger was the currency. And soon, someone would open the trade.

It was a night as black as coal, only the lanterns glowed, and even the stars kept quiet. Then someone did it. The Dane, who had already prayed until he fainted. This time he didn't kneel before God. He knelt by the mast, his face wet with tears, his hands full of splinters from the wood.

"Don't take me," he whispered into the darkness. "Not me. I'll give you everything. My soul, my blood, my name—it doesn't matter. Just let me live one more night." His voice trembled, but each of us heard it. For the silence absorbed it, and the ship creaked in agreement.

In the morning, he was still lying there. Alive. Pale, weak, but breathing. Only one was missing. The Frenchman with the broken leg. Dead. Ice cold, his mouth open, his eyes empty. As if the devil had changed his mind, taken the weaker one because the Dane had offered him a deal.

The men stared. Whispered. "Did he do it? Did he sell us out?" Borke grabbed the Dane, pulled him up, and yelled in his face: "Whose life did you pay for?!" But the Dane just smiled, a wide, insane smile that no longer had any humanity in it. "I'm alive," he whispered, "I'm alive."

The Frenchman was thrown overboard, like all who fall. But this time he sank quickly, without resistance. The sea took him, greedily, as if he were long overdue.

No one laughed. No one drank. Everyone knew: the first deal had been made. And the ship was the damned notary.

After the Dane, it started like a plague that no one could stop. Someone had shown us how it was done – now everyone believed they could save themselves if they just offered the right thing. And so the whispering began. No more just praying, no more just complaining. No – real offers. Like at a market, only the goods were ourselves.

The Spaniard cut his hand, letting a few drops of blood drip onto the deck. "That's enough, isn't it?" he muttered, "a small price to pay for a little peace and quiet." No one answered. But the wood creaked as if it had heard him.

Toad grinned through his stumps of teeth and slurred, "I have nothing but my wife. She's ugly, but she'll last a long time. Take her—if you'll leave me alone." The men looked away. It wasn't funny anymore.

Borke, the giant, roared into the darkness one night: "Take my strength if you want—I don't need it anymore!" In the morning, he was quiet, too quiet. He ate, drank, did what he was told. But the anger was gone. As if burned out.

Others murmured of gold in harbors, of houses they had never owned. Everyone offered whatever came to mind, whether it was true or not. And the ship was always listening. Every beam, every nail seemed to be collecting the promises like signatures in a book.

And me? I kept my mouth shut. But in my head, I heard Marta laughing. That cold, sharp laugh. And I asked myself: What if I could do it? Just one sentence, just one thought, and maybe I'd be out. But I remained silent. Because I knew: On this ship, silence costs less than words.

Thus, the deck became a market where no one wanted to see what they were selling. But everyone knew: there was always a price to pay. And never a cheap one.

While the men whispered, begged, and offered their souls for sale like cheap merchandise, he stood there. The captain. Pipe in his mouth, the scar across his chest, and this silence that was louder than any prayer. He didn't interfere. He didn't grin. He didn't warn. He let them talk. And that was precisely the worst part.

For the silence seemed like consent. As if he had already made his deal long ago. Some swore that his scar was the seal placed by the devil himself. Not a cut, not a wound, but a contract written in flesh.

"He's his man," murmured Toad, pale, his voice hoarse. "He signed. He's leading us because he sold us out long ago." Others nodded, quietly, surreptitiously. No one said it out loud. But everyone thought it.

And then there was that evening. A storm hung on the horizon, lightning flickered far out. The captain stood at the bow, puffing on his pipe. Suddenly, he spoke, barely audibly: "Everything has its price."

The ship cracked, deep and full, as if it had confirmed it. A rope broke, a sail fluttered loose—and at the same moment, laughter was heard. Not from the men. From somewhere deeper. From the sea.

Since then, we knew: He was no longer a simple man. Perhaps he never had been. Perhaps he had made the deal long ago. Perhaps he wasn't the ship's captain. Perhaps he was just the damned notary.

And yet, no one dared to hate him. Because we all knew: what he had, we wanted too. To survive. And for that, every seal, every scar, every devil was cheap.

In the end, we realized: It wasn't about us individually. Not about the Dane, not about Toad, not about Bark, or anyone else. It was never about what one of us whispered, what one of us sacrificed. The trade wasn't about people. The trade*was*the ship.

Every word, every curse, every plea nailed itself deep into the planks. The wood no longer creaked like wood—it spoke. The deck wasn't a floor, it was parchment. The nails weren't nails, but seals. And every breath we took here was a signature we couldn't take back.

One of the men—the Dutchman—finally said it, his voice trembling: "We've already signed." He looked around, pale as chalk. "We're sailing under a contract. Each of us is in it. It doesn't matter whether we haggle or remain silent. The ship has us long ago."

No one objected. No one could. Because it was true. We were no longer just passengers. We were part of the document. Our skin, our blood, our breath—everything was sucked in. The ship wasn't just sailing on the sea. It was sailing on us.

And the captain? He stood at the bow, his pipe between his lips, the scar like a stamp across his chest. He didn't speak again, nor did he need to. He was the witness. The notary. The guarantor that the deal was valid.

So we sailed on. Not on wood, not on iron, not on sail. We sailed on a contract. And the devil had long since countersigned it.

Bloody nights below deck

There was no place to sleep below deck. It was a hole, a stinking box where we squatted on top of each other like rotting potatoes. The air was thick, humid, sweet with disease and old rum. Every breath tasted of metal and mold, and if you tried to breathe deeper, you immediately felt like someone was pressing a pillow against your face.

The hammocks hung so close together, too close. One rolled around, and his elbow landed in your face. One coughed, and you felt his filth in your throat. A few men weren't sleeping at all. They just sat there, staring into the darkness, waiting for the darkness to stare back.

The creaking of the planks never stopped. It wasn't the normal sighing of wood in a swell. It was deeper, more rhythmic, like a breath. Like a heartbeat that didn't come from us. Each of us heard it, but no one spoke it.

Above us, water dripped from the deck planks. Sometimes clear, sometimes salty, sometimes reddish, as if it came not from the sea, but from something alive. Sometimes it fell on your face, in the middle of your sleep, and you didn't know if it was just water.

The rats were the real masters below deck. They ran across ropes, climbed hammocks, and ripped shreds from clothing. Some crawled over faces while men slept, and no one screamed anymore, because screaming didn't help.

And then there was the whispering. No one whispered like that. Voices, thin, scratchy, from somewhere between the planks. They didn't speak loudly, not clearly. It was more like singing, a humming, sometimes a laugh. But always there. When you opened your eyes at night, you knew: something wasn't lying in a hammock talking.

This is how every night below deck began. No rest, no sleep, just the confinement, the stench, and the certainty that something else was living down there with us.

It didn't take much to get things going. Below deck, everything was too close, too cramped, too loud. A sip of rum that wasn't shared. A piece of bread that one person grabbed faster than another. An elbow in their sleep. Little things—but on this ship, no little thing was small.

The first fight started because one of them didn't pass the cup to the other. One reached for it, the other pulled it back, both yelled at the same time, and then fists flew. It wasn't fair, there were no rules—just brutal blows, until one of them lay bleeding on the ground. No one stopped them. Why should they? Everyone knew: sooner or later, we'd all be in trouble.

Another time, it was a battle for a spot in the hammock. One man came back, found another in his bunk, and drew his knife. The other was faster with his fist, and in an instant they were rolling among the rats, blood on the planks, sweat in the air. The rats screeched as if they enjoyed it.

It wasn't long before no one was surprised anymore when blood was flowing. A bloody mouth, a broken nose, a slashed arm—it was as much a part of the experience as the creaking of the planks. It was swallowed like rum.

And always there was the ship. It creaked, groaned, sighed—not because it was suffering, but because it was watching. Every time blood splashed onto the planks, the creaking seemed deeper, more content. As if it were thirstier than all of us.

The nights became shorter, darker, and louder. Every breath could be the trigger. Every wrong look could be a knife. Below deck, nothing was small anymore. Everything became big. Everything became bloody.

After a while, it wasn't just about fists and knives anymore. It was about what no one wanted to see—what waited in the darkness. The nights grew longer, heavier, denser. And in that darkness, fear came like a rat crawling into your ear.

One woke up screaming, hauling himself up on the ropes. "Someone touched me!" he yelled, his eyes wide, his breath gasping. The others cursed and threw rum in his face, but he swore, "A cold hand, right on my throat." No one laughed. Not anymore.

Another, the Dutchman, said he felt a stranger's breath at night, right on the back of his neck. Warm. Humid. He turned around – there was no one there.

But the hammock next to him was empty. And yet it swung as if someone had been lying in it.

Toad began to hear voices. "They're talking to me," he murmured, "they say there are too many of us." He giggled, ripped out his hair, and stuffed it into cracks in the planks, as if that could calm something down.

The mouse lay quietly in his bunk, but his eyes were open, fixed, as if he saw something the rest of us couldn't. Once I heard him whisper, "They want to come sailing with us." He smiled. And that was worse than any screaming.

Some men swore there was someone else living below deck. A stranger. Someone no one had ever seen on deck. Footsteps that couldn't be counted. Shadows that appeared and disappeared in the darkness. Names that were called—quietly, close—and no one knew who it was.

The fists never stopped, the blood kept dripping. But worse than that were the nights when we all knew: We weren't alone. And the thing that slept with us had no name. Not yet.

It was only a matter of time before someone stopped striking with their fists. Below deck, the knife was closer than sleep.

That night was quieter than usual. Only coughing, the creaking of the ship, the scratching of rats. Then – a gasp, abrupt, short, like a strangled word. A dull thud, as if a sack had fallen. And then the wheezing. Wet, gurgling, impossible to ignore.

The men jumped up as best they could in the darkness, staring into the corner where the noise came from. One lay there, his eyes wide, his mouth open, blood gushing from a wound no one wanted to see. Too dark, too tight, too close. Only the glint, the dripping onto the planks.

"Who was it?" someone asked. But no one answered. Maybe everyone had seen it, maybe no one. Maybe we had all decided to look away. Because someone who stabs in the dark doesn't just stab flesh. They also stab trust. And trust had long since rotted away here.

The blood seeped into the wood, black and glistening. And the ship cracked. Long, deep, contented. Like a drunkard after the first sip.

No one pulled the body up immediately. We left it there until morning, and the rats did what they always do. Only when daylight filtered through the cracks

did they drag it onto the deck. Silence. No prayer, no curse, just a dull thud as it slid into the sea.

But everyone knew: the dead man hadn't been taken by the sea. Not by the storm. He had been taken by us. By us—or by that which lay with us in the darkness.

And from then on, everyone knew: sleep below deck was no longer safe. Murder was happening below deck, and the ship sucked every drop of blood like a contract demanding another signature.

After the first murder, there was no turning back. The lower deck had tasted blood, and from then on, it flowed regularly. Not like an accident, not like a slip-up—but like a habit.

Knives flashed faster than words. One wrong look, one too loud cough, one piece of bread kept for themselves – and suddenly there was a blade, suddenly there was a fist. No one shouted "Stop!" anymore. No one ran between them. Why should they? Everyone knew: If you fall, you make way.

The planks were constantly damp. Sometimes with sweat, sometimes with piss, sometimes with blood. It smelled of iron, of salt, of death. The lower deck stank like a slaughterhouse that's never aired out. Every breath was heavier, denser, as if you were drawing the blood of others directly into your lungs.

The men got used to it. A punch in the face? Everyday life. A tooth missing? No problem. A knife stab? Bad luck. No one counted the dead anymore. They simply disappeared: into the sea, into the darkness, into the woods.

The ship itself absorbed it. The boards beneath our feet were blackened, sticky, and cracked. But they held. More firmly than before. It was as if the planks fed on the blood we shed. Every drop was another nail holding us aboard.

And the worst part: At some point, it felt normal. As if it were part of life that the nights ended in red. As if the ship wouldn't have sailed at all without blood.

Below deck, violence was no longer feared. It was the only law. And everyone still breathing had long since accepted it.

The captain knew what was happening below. He had to know. The creaking of the planks carried every rattle, every dull thud as a body fell. But he didn't lift a finger.

Sometimes he went down the stairs, slowly, pipe in mouth, the scar across his chest like a banner. He stepped into the gloom, studied the men, the bloodstains, the knives, the rats. But he said nothing. He didn't need to say anything. His steps alone were judgment enough.

Once, someone dared to address him directly: "Captain, the lower deck is becoming a slaughterhouse." The captain blew out smoke, cold and heavy, and simply replied: "Those who survive sail. Those who die save space." Then he turned around as if that were the end of it. And that was it.

The men understood. There were no rules on this ship except the one the captain established with his silence: Strength counts. Weakness sinks. Everything else is ballast.

This made the nights even bloodier. Because those who wanted to be strong had to show it—with fists, with knives, with what they had left. Every dead man was not a loss. He was an empty hook in the hammock.

And the ship? It seemed to enjoy it. After each confrontation, it creaked deeper, vibrated more heavily, as if it had just devoured a feast. We all felt it: the wood was no longer just the carrier of our bodies. It was the carrier of our violence.

And the captain? He was the priest who presided over this new religion—a religion of blood and silence.

There was no place for sleep below deck. It was a descent every time you went down the steps—like a ladder straight into the jaws of hell. Above, the sea raged; below, something else raged.

The air was thicker than smoke. Every breath tasted of iron, sweat, and pus. Some men only crawled down when they had to, praying they'd come back up alive. One said, "There's no tomorrow down here." And he was right. Below deck, there were only nights. Nights filled with whispers, knives, and blood.

The creaking of the planks no longer sounded like wood. It sounded like laughter. Muffled, deep, always just when a drop of blood fell on them. Some swore they saw faces in the cracks, grinning, panting. Others said the voices from the shadows grew louder the more blood flowed.

The rats grew fat. Their black, shiny bellies, they crawled heavily between the hammocks. They ate what was left, staring at you as if they knew your flesh would soon be yours.

And we—we lived with it. We slept on bloody ropes, we drank from cups that smelled of iron. We accepted it because there was nothing else. Below deck was no place of rest, no shelter. It was a slaughterhouse that refilled night after night.

I'm telling you, comrade: whoever went down the stairs didn't get on a ship again. They went into hell. And the worst part was – at some point, you came back up again. And you acted as if everything were normal.

The first sailor overboard

It hung in the air, heavier than salt, heavier than rum. Everyone on board knew that one of us would soon be hit. We didn't say it, we drank against it, we laughed louder than we should have – but deep inside, we could already hear the sea chewing.

The conversations became shorter. Men stared longer into each other's faces, as if they could read who would be the one. One coughed for too long, and the rest backed away. One laughed too loudly, and the others looked away as if he were already half dead. We were a pack that felt: One had to fall so the others could get a breath.

Even the sea seemed restless. No waves like usual, no steady sea. It was as if it wasn't rocking us, but itself, impatient, hungry, an animal whose mouth had already opened. Sometimes I swore it was rumbling—not like thunder, but like a growling stomach.

The rats were louder, faster. They ran across the deck, biting into sacks and ropes, as if they knew: Soon there will be meat, better than grain. Even the gulls, which usually followed us like vultures, screeched higher, more shrilly, and perched in rows on the yardarms, like spectators waiting for the show.

And us? We pretended everything was normal. Cards, rum, curses. But no one laughed genuinely. Every sentence was fragile, every word sounded like a farewell. We all felt the same wind on our necks, the same cold breath:*Soon it will get one.*

And the worst part was: No one knew who it would be. But everyone hoped it wasn't them.

He wasn't a special man. Not a strong man like Bark, not a fox like Lars, not a broken man like Toad. A quiet dog who worked more than he talked. That's exactly why it was immediately noticeable when he changed.

It started with his eyes. He stared into the water, longer, deeper, as if there was something down there for him. When someone nudged him, he blinked as if returning from far away. "Everything okay?" someone asked. He nodded, but his smile was empty.

Then he spoke. Not to us, no—to the sea. First quietly, then louder. Words no one understood, a language that gurgled more than spoke. One laughed nervously: "The boy swallowed too much salt." But no one laughed for long.

At night, we heard him murmuring. He lay in his hammock, staring at the ceiling, whispering in a voice that wasn't his. "Yes... yes... I'm coming." Sometimes he laughed, dry and raspy. No one laughs like that in their sleep.

The next day, he staggered across the deck, stumbling as if someone had been invisibly pulling him. His hands grabbed at the railing, then at the air. He babbled incoherently, laughed, cried, laughed again. At one point, he cried, "There she is! She's calling me!"

We followed his gaze, but there was nothing—just waves, gray foam, a few hungry seagulls. But he saw something. Something meant only for him.

The men stepped back. No one reached for him, no one grabbed his arm. We knew: He was the one. The chosen one. And if someone was chosen, you couldn't stop him.

The sea had already reached out. It was only a matter of seconds.

It didn't happen with a big bang. No storm, no wave, no blow. It was simply the moment he let go.

He stood at the railing, his eyes wide, his lips moving as if whispering in a lover's ear. Then he tipped over. No pushing, no wrestling. He leaned forward as if to embrace the sea—and fell.

His arms flailed in the air as if he'd changed his mind, but by then it was already too late. A scream escaped his lips, high, hoarse, brittle. Not long, not heroic. Just a short sound, like a sack tearing. Then he hit the ground.

The water took him with a dull thud, louder than all our hearts. For a moment we saw him again, his arms wild, his face white, his eyes panicked. Then he was gone. No trace, no blisters, nothing. Only the sea closing over him, so smooth, as if it had been expecting him.

The seagulls screeched. One fluttered directly above the spot, swooped down as if it were going to chase him. Then it took off again, screaming, as if it had seen more than we had.

We stood at the railing, our fingers clenched in the wood. No one spoke. No one shouted. We knew what we were all thinking: Whether he had jumped or fallen didn't matter. He no longer belonged to us. He belonged to the sea. And the sea hadn't taken him like a sacrifice. It had taken him like a meal.

A few immediately ran to the railing. Reflex. You hear someone fall, and your body wants to save them, even though your head already knows it's over. One yelled, "Rope! Get a rope!" and threw the end blindly into the water. It lay there, useless, just drifting, as if mocking the dead man.

Others leaned forward, staring into the gray, their hands white from the railing. Their eyes searched, searched desperately, as if the guy might come back up again, waving, begging. But there was nothing. No hand, no scream, no bubbling. Only waves that stretched out like tongues savoring the last taste.

And then there were the quiet ones. Men who didn't even go to the railing. They stayed seated, their eyes blank, as if they already knew. One took a sip of rum, put down the bottle, and simply said, "One down." No anger, no sadness. Just a sentence, as dry as the planks under the sun.

No one knew whether we were relieved or horrified. Maybe both. A part of us thought:*Well, the sea has taken its share, maybe it will leave us alone now.*But another part knew: This was just the beginning. Once the sea has tasted blood, it won't stop.

And so we stood there, with wet hands and empty faces, the useless rope still in the water, and waited. But waited for what? For him to come back? Or for the next one to fall?

The captain barely moved. While we were still hanging from the railing, his eyes staring into space, he stood at the bow like a statue that had never done anything but stare at the sea.

His pipe smoldered. He sucked on it, blew out the smoke, as if this were just another scene in a play he'd seen a thousand times. Not a word came from his lips. No "bring him back," no "rest in peace." Only silence.

And yet there was something in his gaze. No pity, no anger, not even surprise. It was as if he had seen this fall long before. Perhaps even the day the man had boarded the ship. A moment in which the sea had chosen him – and the captain had simply nodded.

A few of us stole glances at him, hoping for a sign, a gesture, something human. But there was nothing. Only the scar across his chest, stretching in the wind, and that face, hard as stone, old as salt.

The pipe crackled. The smoke spiraled upwards. And for a moment, I felt as if he wasn't smoking the tobacco at all, but us. Our fear, our guilt, our damned hopelessness.

So he stood there, and we understood: for him, the sea wasn't the enemy. It was just the ticket inspector who wanted to see a ticket from time to time. And he was the only one on board who never forgot that we were all already on the list.

The sea took him faster than a knife through butter. No drifting, no wriggling, no resurfacing. A maelstrom, black and silent, opened up right where he had fallen and swallowed him, as if it had only been waiting.

The waves gathered briefly, forming a whirlpool so smooth, so clean, that you could swear the water had a throat. And that throat closed with a gulp, dull, final.

A few men later swore they saw something moving in the whirlpool. Hands, faces, shadows. Whether it was the sea or hell—no one knew. But they were certain: it wasn't just water that took him.

The gulls screeched, swooped down, then fluttered back up as if they had left the rest of their meal to the sea. The rats on deck paced restlessly back and forth, as if they had realized the competition was too strong.

And the ship? It creaked. Loud, deep, as if it were burping. Like someone after a deep gulp. The planks vibrated beneath our feet, full, content. Some of us instinctively held our hands to the railing, as if we needed to make sure the ship wouldn't swallow us too.

It was as if the sea had taken possession. Not just of him—but of us as well. A contract, freshly sealed, with his body as its signature.

And in that moment, everyone knew: It wasn't the last. It was just the beginning.

After the fall, the ship was no longer the same. Before, the sea was an enemy, a beast to be fought. But now... now it was a judge. One who takes whomever he wants, and none of us could pretend we had a choice anymore.

The men looked at each other differently. Each glance was longer, more suspicious. Anyone who coughed was suspicious. Anyone who laughed was suspicious. Anyone who was too quiet was even more suspicious. Everyone knew:*Someone is next.*And everyone hoped:*Please not me.*

We worked more quietly, drank faster, and cursed more cautiously. Even card games weren't the same anymore. Before, it was noise, laughter, and fights. Now it was just hands shaking as they tossed dice, eyes never leaving the sea.

Borke murmured, "That was the limit." And he was right. From now on, no man was safe. Not on deck, not below, not even in his sleep. The sea had shown that it could strike at any moment. One step too close, one look too long – and you were gone.

The rats grew fatter, the seagulls greedier. Even the ship seemed to be listening, as if waiting for the next blow. Everyone knew: The sea wants more. And the ship wants to eat along.

So we continued to live, with this invisible line breathing down our necks. From now on, every night, every day, was just a question:*Who will it go after next?*

And the worst part was: we knew the answer would always be “one of us.”

Cannon thunder in the fog

The morning began so ordinary it was almost suspicious. The sky hung heavy, but not yet evil. A gentle wind brushed the sails, carrying salt with it, but no promise of a storm. Men shouted orders, the ropes creaked, and somewhere someone sang a dirty song he'd brought back from Amsterdam. Everything was so normal it tasted like a lie.

Then came the fog.

It didn't announce itself with a scream, a rumble, or a weather signal. It crawled. Quietly, stealthily, a gray shadow on the horizon, so thin you could mistake it for smoke. A veil that looked like the haze after a night of heavy drinking. But it didn't stop coming closer. It grew, spread, slowly, patiently. Like an animal that knows its prey has no chance.

One of the men, a Norwegian with a face like a rugged rock, saw it first. "That's not weather," he muttered, and no one laughed at his superstition. We all sensed it. Something was creeping across the sea that wasn't simply "fog."

Within minutes, it was there. First a thin band, then a wall. Gray, thick, wet. It didn't just wrap itself around us; it crept into our throats, our eyes, our bones. We coughed, we wiped our faces, but it remained.

My vision collapsed like a sack. One moment I could see the horizon, the sea, the distant nothingness – and the next, everything was gone. No longer a line separating sky and water. No glimmer of distance. Only gray. So dense that even my own ship seemed alien. I stretched out my hand – and could barely see my fingers.

The lanterns on deck glowed dimly, as if afraid to shine. The fog devoured the light, swallowing it like a hungry dog. Even fire had no power against this gray.

The men fell silent. At first, all you could hear were their breathing, heavy, rapid, and labored. Then you couldn't hear them at all, because each of us held our breath, as if we could remain invisible that way. Rum barrels remained closed, maps ignored. There was only this silence.

And the silence was worse than any storm. Because silence means something is listening.

The sea itself had disappeared. No lapping, no rolling, no splashing. As if the water had simply vanished. The ship no longer rocked. It hung still, as if in a dream, or worse: as if in a grave.

"We're floating," someone whispered, and he was right. It was no longer the feeling of sailing on water. It was as if we were standing in nothingness. No up, no down. Only gray, gripping you, creeping into your pores, consuming your thoughts.

You could see things in the fog that weren't there. Shadows, shapes, faces. One person swore he saw his mother, who had been dead for years. Another said he saw a girl in a red dress walking along the water. I didn't see anything myself, but I felt something. A pressure. A look. As if the fog wasn't just surrounding us, but on us.

The seagulls were gone. Not a single cry. The rats were silent, too, as if they had crawled away. Even the plague victims, who usually coughed like broken bellows, held their breath. And the ship—the ship didn't creak. Not a sound. It was silent, as if listening.

Every footstep echoed strangely. Someone stepped onto the deck, and it sounded as if someone had taken the same step a hundred meters away. An echo, but not one coming from us. A few men kept turning around, as if strangers were walking beside them. But there was nothing. Only gray.

Rum didn't help. We gulped it down, greedily, to drown the silence. But even the rum no longer burned. It tasted bland, dull, as if the fog had taken away its edge.

"The sea is holding its breath," the Norwegian murmured again, and this time no one objected. Because that's exactly how it felt: We were in a giant mouth that was holding its breath before biting.

The captain stood at the bow, motionless, his pipe in his hand, but not smoldering. Even he seemed unable to make the tobacco stand against the gray. His gaze was firm, unmoving, but something in his posture told us: He knew. He knew what this was.

And then it dawned on all of us: We hadn't fallen into fog. The fog had fallen into us.

Nothing was quiet in the fog. Not really. He was just pretending. It was that false calm, like a whore smiling at you while she already has your knife in her hand.

At first, it was small things. A knock, somewhere far back on the ship, where no one was standing. Men ran there, found nothing. Then again, this time from the other side. As if someone were walking around the ship, from the outside, step by step. Only: there was nothing to be seen.

Then voices. Whispers, thin, faint, but unmistakable. One swore he heard his brother. Another said he heard his daughter's voice calling his name. I myself

heard a laugh I recognized, Marta's laugh, cold and sharp, so close it seemed as if she were standing right behind me. I turned around, but there was only gray. And that gray was grinning.

Sometimes it came like a shout, very close: "Hey!" or "Here!" We jumped, looked in the direction it came from – and there was nothing. No figure, no shadow. Just the thick, wet nothingness that fooled our eyes. One even ran, blindly, almost stumbling over the railing because he swore he saw someone waving.

The footsteps were the worst. Loud, heavy, like boots on planks. But often you could hear them where no one was. Once we heard them above our heads, on the yardarm, even though no one was above. Another time, right below deck, deep, heavy, accompanied by a dull scratching, as if something were running its claws across the wood.

The men became restless. One began to shout his name, just to hear his own voice. Another laughed hysterically, threw himself on the ground, and covered his ears. "They're talking, they're all talking!" he screamed, the veins in his neck almost bursting.

Borke, the giant, roared into the gray: "Show yourself, damn it!" His voice boomed, strong, full of anger. But the answer came immediately: an echo that wasn't his. It came back, deeper, stranger, like a second mouth biting the same words. "SHOW YOURSELF." The men flinched. Borke himself turned pale.

And the ship? It seemed to be playing along. The creaking of the planks was no longer just wood. It was a sound that sounded like a comment, like a mocking laugh. Every blow of the rope against the mast sounded like a whisper, one that was almost understandable—almost.

The fog didn't leave you alone. It never left you alone. Even when no one spoke, you heard footsteps. Even when no one breathed, you heard the panting of someone standing next to you. Even when you closed your eyes, there was that gray behind your eyelids.

The men quickly understood: We weren't just enveloped. We were besieged. Besieged by something that needed no body, no form, no weapon. The fog itself was the army. And we were the fortress, slowly crumbling.

We had almost gotten used to the whispering. To the footsteps no one made. To the voices no one had. Almost. Until the sea reminded us that it could be louder.

It began with a rumble. Muffled. Deep. Like a giant clenching his fist in his sleep. At first we thought it was thunder. A storm hidden in the fog. But this wasn't thunder. It was too precise, too round, too heavy. It was a cannon.

The rumble vibrated through the planks, through our teeth, into our bones. The air itself shuddered, and then came the whistle. A shrill, hungry scream that came from the left and raced over the mast. A cannonball. It hit the water, just beside us, a splash as high as a masthead. The ship rocked, men screamed, ran, ducked, as if one could escape death by turning one's back.

"Fire!" someone yelled reflexively, although no one knew at whom. But the cannons had long since stopped, unloaded, unaimed. We saw nothing, only gray. Only this wet nothingness that clung to us like a blanket.

Then there was another crash. A second cannon. This time closer. The impact ripped away a piece of the railing, splinters flew, one of the men screamed, clutching his face, blood trickling between his fingers. Another stumbled over him and fell, the deck sticky beneath him.

"Ship in sight?!" Borke yelled, his eyes wide, but there was nothing. No sail, no mast, no shadow. Just fog. And yet bullets flew.

The creaking of the ship had become louder, deeper. It sounded as if it were laughing. As if it were enjoying the way we ran around blindly, like rats in a box with stones thrown into it.

A third rumble. The whistle again. The bullet whizzed just above the deck, snapping a rope, a lantern, which sprayed sparks and was immediately extinguished in the fog. Men threw themselves to the ground, one falling so hard he couldn't get up.

And there it was: the thought no one expressed. Perhaps there was no other ship at all. Perhaps no one was firing at us. Perhaps it was the fog itself speaking cannons.

I swear, at that moment I heard a whisper. Not a human, not an echo, but the gray itself, deep, rumbling:*Not yet. Not yet.*

The fog roared back. Each clap of thunder grew louder, denser, faster. Bullets screamed through the gray, tearing shreds from the sails, splinters from the planks, blood from the men. But there was nothing to be seen. No mast, no bow, no enemy sail. Only shadows that flashed in the fog like ghosts, then immediately vanished again.

"Return fire!" someone yelled, his voice rising. We ran to the cannons, loading them frantically, stuffing them with powder, bullets, and tow, sweating, cursing. But where to aim? Where to fire when the eye cannot see? One simply struck into the gray, like a blind man striking against the darkness.

The first of our bullets blasted out. The ship shuddered, the recoil like a punch to the gut. The bullet disappeared into the fog, and we listened, like dogs waiting for a bark. Nothing. No bang, no splintering, no scream. Just the endless, swallowing gray.

Then again: a rumble, a whistle. This time the bullet hit the deck, ripping open a barrel, rum flowing over the wood, mingling with blood. Men fell, gasping for support, one fell, his face shattered.

"There!" someone shouted, pointing into the gray. And yes—there was something. A shadow, tall, black, like a mast, moving in the fog. We all held our breath, our cannons ready. But the next moment, it was gone. Simply vanished. Only the fog grinned back.

Again we fired, blindly, desperately. Some laughed, madly, piercingly, because they knew how pointless it was. Every bullet we fired into the gray came back—not as iron, but as an echo, a rumble, a reminder that we weren't fighting humans.

The men cursed, screamed, prayed. One wept loudly, tearing his hair out. "They don't exist!" he screamed. "There is no ship!" And perhaps he was right. Perhaps we were shooting at nothing. Perhaps nothingness was shooting at us.

The mouse, the boy, stood on the mast, staring into the gray. His face was still, too still. He was almost smiling, as if he knew who we were fighting. I saw it, and a chill ran down my spine.

And as the bullets continued to fly, we realized: The enemy was invisible, yes. But he wasn't far away. He was right here, in every damn fiber of the fog.

The deck transformed into a slaughter. Cannons thundered somewhere in the gray, bullets whistled by, shrapnel flew through the air, and every man was

running, stumbling, screaming. The order that had once existed was gone—all that remained was chaos, a pack of dogs lashing out at each other in the dark.

A bullet struck the railing, shattering it like rotten wood. Splinters shot through the air, one of them burying itself deep in the neck of a sailor. He grabbed for it, gasped, and fell, his blood spraying in an arc across the planks. The rats screeched and immediately pounced on the red trail, as if they knew a feast was about to begin.

Another bullet ripped through the cargo hold, crashing into a barrel. Rum flowed out, the sweet stench mingling with smoke and sweat. Men slipped and fell, a few landing amidst a sea of broken glass and splinters. One lay still, his leg at an unnatural angle, screaming so loudly that it ripped through even the fog for a moment.

Our side's cannons rolled, some breaking free from their cables, crashing through the deck, crushing a man who didn't jump fast enough. His body snapped like a branch, dull, quick, and then he was part of the chaos, simply an obstacle that others stumbled over.

Smoke drifted over the ship, but the fog immediately swallowed it. Everything was a blur of gray and screams. You no longer knew which way was forward or backward, who was alive and who was already dead. Hands reached for you, and you didn't know whether they wanted to save you or pull you down.

A shot hit the deck right next to me. Wood and iron flew into the air, a splinter slicing down my cheek, hot and wet. I tasted my own blood and knew the ship tasted it. Because every time a bullet hit, the planks cracked deeper, as if demanding "more."

One of the men laughed hysterically in the midst of the chaos, his eyes wide, his face smeared with blood. "Do you see it?! Do you see it?!" he yelled, pointing into the gray. I saw nothing—only shadows that looked like ships, like masts, like men, and were gone the next moment.

The deck was no longer a workplace. It was an arena. A stage for death, and the fog was the spectator, applauding with every boom.

In the midst of the chaos, he stood there. The captain. Not running, not yelling, not like the rest of us, who blindly packed the cannons and screamed as we fired into the gray. He stood at the bow, pipe in his mouth, the scar across his

chest like a banner, and his eyes stared into nothingness, as if he had already seen everything up ahead.

The men shouted orders at once, but it was his voice that cut through. Cold, short, crisp. "Fire."—and the cannons roared. "Load."—and hands stuffed powder and iron as if he were holding them by strings. He didn't shout, he didn't have to. A single word from him was louder than any explosion.

One dared to shout: "Who are we fighting?!" The captain didn't turn around. His gaze remained fixed in the fog, hard, unmoving. "Whoever it may be." He said nothing more. But there was a knowledge in his eyes that made all of our throats tighten. He knew. He knew what lurked out there—or that nothing lurked there at all, except the sea itself.

Some men began to whisper, even as they carried bullets: "He knows them. He knows those who are shooting." One murmured: "Maybe we're not shooting at ships. Maybe we're shooting at shadows." And as another bullet struck, the men nodded—quietly, palely.

But the captain remained motionless. He looked like a part of the ship, as if he were fused with the planks. Every step he took sounded as if the wood were breathing with him. As if he were the only reason the ship hadn't split yet.

And I swear: for a moment, it looked like he was smiling. Not a big laugh, not a grin. Just a tiny twitch in his face, as if he knew full well that we weren't shooting at people. Not at pirates. Not at the Navy. But at something older than all of us combined.

And worst of all, he seemed like he'd fought this war before.

And then – silence.

So abruptly that our ears rang. One more blow, a crash, a shower of splinters – and suddenly there was nothing. No rumbling, no whistling, no scream. Only our own breathing, harsh, rattling, far too loud in the silence.

The fog lingered for a moment, thick and wet, sticky like a coat of sweat. Then it began to dissipate. Not quickly, not abruptly—but like smoke that knows it has done its job. It slipped away, slipped off the deck, slipped into the sea, and disappeared into the distance. All that remained was a gray sky and a still sea, smooth, innocent, as if nothing had ever happened.

No ship. No sail. No enemy.

The men stared over the railing, their hands clutched white, as if hoping to see a shadow somewhere that would explain it all. But there was nothing. No wreckage, no bodies, no splinters in the water. Just us. Us and the echo in our heads.

The dead lay on deck. One with his head split open, one with his stomach ripped open, one so torn by splinters that no one wanted to say his name. Blood seeped into the cracks, the rum had mixed with salt, and a sweet, sharp stench hung in the air.

No one spoke. We pushed the bodies to the railing, one by one. It was mechanical, like work. No prayer, no curse, no song. Just dull thuds as they fell into the water. And each time we waited to see if the sea would take them or spit them back out. This time it took them immediately. Perhaps because they had long since belonged to the fog.

The captain stood at the bow, smoking again. As if he'd only been waiting for the curtain to fall. His gaze was hard, but calm, almost content. For him, it hadn't been a battle, just an episode. Another chapter in a book only he could read.

But the men knew: We had fought, sweated, bled – against nothing. Against fog. Against shadows. Against our own echo. And that was worse than any flesh-and-blood enemy.

Because once the fog found you, it wasn't gone. Not really. It was just in your lungs, in your head, in your sleep.

And while the sea was calm again and the sky pretended to be innocent, each of us knew: The fog is coming back. And next time, it'll take more than just flesh.

The laughter of the whores in Amsterdam

After the fog, the crew drank as if they could wash the gray from their throats. Rum flowed like water, coarse, bitter, burning. Every sip was a desperate attempt to drown out the roar of the cannons, the whistling of the bullets, the whispers in the gray. But rum is not a healer. Rum is only a key. And with it, the men unlocked the same door: the one to Amsterdam.

The conversations slid along like dice across a greasy brothel table. One began: "Remember that little window in Warmoesstraat? The one with the red curtain?" Laughter erupted immediately, loud, rusty laughter, so brittle it sounded more like pain than fun. Another chimed in: "And that redhead with the gold teeth!" – and they were all roaring as if they were sitting in that alley again, the stench of piss and perfume in their nostrils.

Amsterdam crept back into their minds, deeper with every sip. The women's laughter, bright, sharp, sometimes sweet, sometimes like a knife. "Come here, sailor, and bring your gold!" – so shrilled the memories. And every man on board heard it again, heard it echoing through the alleys, over the canals, over the crooked houses, into the smoky dives where they had exchanged their last silver for a warm lap.

One, the Scotsman, almost wept as he swayed the bottle. "Their laughter, brothers... their laughter was brighter than any bell." His voice broke, and he slammed his fist on the table as if trying to get it back. Others laughed at him, but only halfheartedly. Because they knew he was right.

The sea was silent that night. No creaking, no roaring. Only rum, voices, and that damned laughter in their heads. A laughter sweeter than any song, and crueler than any curse.

And as the men drank and shouted, I felt it: We were no longer at sea. We were sailing through Amsterdam, through alleys full of dirt and warmth, through lights that were never meant for us. And yet it was only a memory. Just a ghost of rum and greed.

Rum in the stomach loosens the tongue, and soon it wasn't just remembering. It was listening. Real listening.

The whores' laughter echoed through the ship, as if the damned walls themselves had begun to giggle. First only in their heads, then in the wind, then in the creaking of the planks. Some men laughed along, louder, more rudely, just as they had in the alleys, but their voices quickly broke because they realized: The laughter was returning without any of us opening our mouths.

It was a sharp chuckle, like glass shattering. Sometimes a throaty whinny, sometimes a gurgling cackle, so full of rum it dripped into your ear. It beckoned. It pulled you, like a rope cinching you around the chest. "Come here, sailor... bring your gold... bring your heart..."

The Dutchman swore he heard the voice of a woman with whom he had once shared a bed for a week. He called her name as confidently as if she were standing on deck. "She's laughing! She's laughing after me!" he screamed and tried to run to the railing. Two men grabbed him and held him back. He fought back, cursed, howled, but his gaze remained fixed on the water, as if someone were waving down below.

Another whispered, "They're calling us. They're all calling. They want us to come home." He laughed nervously, and at the same moment a third swore he'd heard that exact sentence before—but in a woman's voice, somewhere just beyond the cabin door.

Laughter became a lure. It promised warmth, light, perfume. It promised an escape from this floating hell. But each of us knew it was a trap. For no laughter was ever free. It always came at a cost: coins, dignity, life. And now, out here, it would cost more than all the gold in the world.

I swear to you, comrade: That night, Amsterdam was laughing through the wind. Laughing at us, laughing at us. And some of us wanted to jump up, run, simply run into the sea, just to escape that mockery.

Amsterdam wasn't a dream. It was filth, stench, and greed—and yet that night we imagined it as a lost paradise. Every drop of rum made the images sharper.

The men spoke of the alleys, narrow and damp, the stones slippery with piss and beer. Of the lights in the windows, red as blood, warm as fire, behind which sat women laughing, beckoning, screaming. Of the harborside bars where the floor was sticky, the air filled with smoke and lies, and where a sailor could gamble away all his wages in one night and still die happy.

They spoke of warmth. Not the warmth of the south, not sun on the skin, but warmth in the lap, warmth in a room where the cold of the sea was finally outside. A feast, a barrel of wine, a body. Everything cheap, everything spoiled—and yet more comfort than any booty.

One grinned, spat on the deck, and said, "That was freedom. Not this ship, not this barge that's eating us. Freedom was when you fall over with a whore in your arms and a glass in your hand." And everyone laughed, in agreement, with a bitterness that ran deeper than any joke.

I remembered the alleys, the smell—sweet, rotten, but alive. Of fish, of smoke, of bodies squatting too close together. The stench of the harbor, the cries of

seagulls, the clinking of glasses. Everything was raw, dirty, but human. Not like the sea, which had no skin, no heart, no eyes.

And therein lay the contrast: Amsterdam was hard, but it was made of flesh. The ship was hard, but it was made of nothing. And between these two worlds we hung, like bugs in a crack.

The men laughed and raved, each telling his stories louder, dirtier, as if trying to outdo the other. But beneath the words lay the truth: We didn't want Amsterdam. We just wanted something different from here. And the whores' laughter echoing in our heads became a seal of approval.

Amsterdam was no longer a memory. It was the antithesis. Proof that we had once existed somewhere else. And that's exactly why it hurt so much.

It was as if the ship had opened its decks that evening for a confession. Every man spoke of women. Not like poets, not like saints—but like drunkards, like dogs sniffing the flesh they can never fully eat.

The Norwegian told of a woman with hair as black as pitch. "She told me she was waiting," he murmured as he puffed on his pipe. "But by the time I came back, she'd already found someone else. A butcher." He laughed dryly. "Maybe he had better meat."

Toad chuckled with his stumps in his mouth. "My wife... she stayed. Not because she loves me. Because she couldn't find anyone better. I come back, and she laughs the way whores laugh—not with joy, just with hunger. And I stay anyway. Because that's all that remains."

The Scotsman, who rarely spoke, suddenly raised his head. His eyes were glassy. "There was one... one who once told me I was beautiful. Only once. She was drunk, and so was I. But I swear, that was the only sentence that ever mattered." He tipped the cup, swallowed, and no one made fun of him.

Borke growled: "Women? Thieves all of them. They take your gold, your flesh, your heart—and in return give you a laugh that isn't even real." He slammed his fist on the deck. "And yet... yet you run back. Because even their fake laughter is better than the silence of the sea."

A young Spaniard told of a prostitute who once kissed him on the forehead when he could barely stand. "No business. Just like that. I don't know why. Maybe I looked like her son." His voice broke, and he fell silent.

And me? I thought of Marta. Marta with her teeth like glass, her hands like claws. She had laughed at me when I told her I wanted to stay. "Stay, and you'll become like everyone else: a dog without teeth." I went on the ship. She laughed after me, and I can still hear that laughter today.

So we all spoke, one after the other, our images of women laid on the table like knives. No one spoke of love. No one spoke of hope. Only of hunger, of mockery, of the hole in the chest that keeps grasping for the fake laugh.

And there was no wind rushing above us. Only the echo. As if the whores of Amsterdam were really laughing, far across the sea, over every wave, right into our dirty faces.

It started harmlessly, like everything that ultimately broke our necks. At first, it was only in our heads. A giggle that one swore he heard in a dream. Another said he heard a woman's scream as he was falling asleep, so real he was sure she was sitting next to him. We laughed at him, but the laughter remained—not his, not ours. Someone else's.

Then it came across the deck. In the middle of the night, when the moon was little more than a blunt knife, it suddenly came clearly. A laugh, bright, mocking, piercing. Not like the roar of a sailor, not like the cracking of wood. A woman's laugh. Amsterdam laughter.

The men froze. Not a cough, not a curse, not a step. Only this laughter, which flitted across the ship, from mast to mast, from sail to sail, as if the entire ship had become a brothel.

"Did you hear that?!" someone shouted. Of course we did. Everyone had heard it. But no one wanted to admit it. Because admitting it meant: We were no longer alone.

Then the whispering began. "They're here," murmured the Dutchman, his eyes as wide as plates. "They've come, they're coming for us." He pointed into the darkness, and I swear to you, comrade: for a brief moment, I saw a figure. A woman's figure. White, fluttering, slender. She stood at the mainmast, her lips red, her smile broad. Then she was gone. Only shadow, only night.

The men became restless. One laughed nervously, as if to show he wasn't afraid. But his laughter broke off in the middle, and the echo came back—the same pitch, the same voice, but not his. The ship laughed along.

Planks creaked in rhythm, ropes trembled, lanterns swayed, even though there was no wind. It was as if the ship itself had become a girl, laughing at us, at our greed, our longing, our misery.

And I, I knew: This laughter wasn't a mockery from the past. It was a specter, fresh, alive, hungry. It filled our heads, our throats, it wanted us to jump up, run into the night, plunge into the sea, just to find out who was laughing.

But no one did. Not yet. We remained stuck, each in our own place, like rats in a trap. The only difference was that the trap was laughing.

The laughter still echoed across the deck, shrill, sharp, like breaking glass. Men crowded the railing, others pressed their hands over their ears. One murmured a prayer, another cursed so quietly that not even the ship could hear it. And in the midst of it all, he stepped forward—the captain.

He slowly emerged from his cabin as if nothing had happened. His pipe smoldered, smoke curled into the night. The scar across his chest gleamed in the moonlight, as if it itself had an ear for the laughter. He stood by the mainmast, listening. There was no twitch in his face, no blink. He inhaled the smoke, exhaled it—and then he spoke.

“Amsterdam laughs at us all.”

Not loud, not roared. Dry, deep, so clear that it sounded like a judgment. The words hung in the air, heavier than the laughter itself. And at that moment, it died down. Not immediately, but gradually. First the giggle in the rigging, then the screech above the sails, and finally the creaking that had sounded like a whinny. Silence.

The men stared at him, their faces pale, their eyes wide. One wanted to object, to say something – but he couldn't utter a word. Because they all knew: He was right. Amsterdam wasn't just laughing then, in the windows, in the alleys. Amsterdam was laughing now, at us, at our longing, at our miserable journey into nothingness.

The captain didn't even look at us. He turned around and went back to his cabin, his pipe still in his mouth, his steps hard and steady. Not another word. No consolation. No orders.

And that was precisely the command: Shut up. Accept the laughter. Because even the dead are laughing at us, and there's nothing you can do about it.

We remained behind, trembling, silent, with the echo in our heads. Some thought the laughter had died down. Others still heard it, faint, deep, somewhere in the woods. I did too.

The laughter died down on deck, yes. But it remained in our skulls, like rum in our beards, like salt in our flesh. Each of us continued to hear it, only differently. One in the wind, one in the creaking of the ropes, one even in our own cough. It became a part of us, like the plague, like hunger, like the curse that hung over the ship.

At night, when everything was quiet, it laughed again. Not loudly, not shrilly – but softly, close, right in your ear. A giggle that kept you awake, that tore your skin open. You could close your eyes, cover your ears, it didn't help. It was there, always there.

Some men talked in their sleep, answering. One laughed along, another whispered names no one knew. Toad once woke up, drenched in sweat, and said, "They were standing next to my hammock." No one asked who "they" were. We knew.

And with each day it became clearer: the laughter was no consolation. No sweet sound, no memory of warmth. It was mockery. A sharp cut. A scorn for everything we had ever believed: that land was better than sea, that women were better than rats, that we were better than anything.

The captain was right. Amsterdam was laughing at all of us. Not the city, not the women. Life itself was laughing. At our longing, at our lies, at our pathetic dream that a harbor was waiting for us somewhere.

And so it remained. No fog, no thunder, no storm. Only the echo of a laughter carried across the waves, accompanying us, mocking us. A laughter harder than iron, colder than salt, and one that had long since turned us all into ghosts, even if we were still breathing.

I knew that if one of us went overboard, the sea would laugh just as much. And in the end, we would all disappear – amidst laughter.

The helmsman's bone whistle

It was one of those nights when the sky hung like a black sack and the sea was so smooth you thought it had no depth at all. Then the helmsman suddenly pulled something out of his pocket. Not a knife, not a dice, not a piece of tobacco. A pipe. Small. White. Oddly shaped, like a bone that should never have been carved that way.

He grinned crookedly, his teeth yellow, and turned the thing between his fingers. "I've been saving it," he said, almost casually, as if it were nothing special. But the men fell silent. Because everyone immediately sensed: This wasn't a toy.

The pipe looked as if it were made of ivory, smooth, shining in the dim light. But if you looked more closely, there was a grain, a line that didn't match ivory. More like the structure of bone. Not animal bone—too fine, too narrow. Rather, something closer to us humans.

"Where did you get that?" someone asked, his voice thin, almost fearful. The helmsman just shrugged. "Found it." He didn't say anything else. But his grin betrayed that he was lying.

Rumors immediately crawled through the air like rats on ropes. Some said it was cut from a whale. Others swore it was the femur of an enemy, thrown overboard by the helmsman himself. And one, an old dog with glazed eyes, simply whispered, "That's not a whale. Not an enemy. That's one of us."

The ship cracked, deeply, slowly, as if it were already listening to what was to come.

The men moved closer, both greedily and terrified. Because something in that piece of bone cried out for attention. It wasn't just a thing. It was a question. An open wound. And each of us knew: sooner or later, the helmsman would blow into it.

He turned the thing a few more times in his fingers, as if trying to keep us squirming. Then he put the whistle to his lips. No one stopped him. Maybe we should have. Maybe it was already too late.

The first note cut through the night like a rusty knife. Not a song, not a beautiful sound. A whine. High, thin, broken. As if the wind itself were blowing through an open wound. Immediately, everyone held their breath. Even the rats stopped.

The sound hung over the deck, vibrating in the sails, creeping into the ropes. It wasn't loud—but it was everywhere. You couldn't ignore it. It crept into your ears, your bones, your teeth. Every jaw clenched, every stomach clenched as if a cold nail had been driven into it.

One of the men immediately dropped his cup. It clattered onto the planks, but no one paid any attention. We all stared at the helmsman, who smiled as the sound passed through him as if he no longer belonged to himself.

The wind, which had previously blown faintly across the sea, suddenly died away completely. The sails hung limp, the ship stood still. No sound of water, no creaking. Only the sound that filled everything. It was as if even the sea was listening.

"Stop it," someone whispered, his voice shaky. But the helmsman didn't. He kept the tone going, over and over, until we all gritted our teeth and clenched our hands into fists, as if trying to stop ourselves from screaming.

Then the sound stopped. Suddenly. Just gone. The night was instantly empty, so empty that the silence was almost painful. One person collapsed, crying, another laughed hysterically. And I swear, something still vibrated in the wood of the ship, faint, like a humming.

Then we realized: We hadn't been listening. The ship had been listening. And it had understood.

The sound still lingered in our bones, even long after the helmsman had taken his whistle from his lips. It was as if it had moved not only the air, but all of us. Each of us in our own way.

The Norwegian turned pale as chalk. He stared into space, his hands clenched into fists, muttering words in a language no one understood. His gaze passed through us, out to sea, as if he heard a command only he could receive.

The Scotsman, on the other hand, began to laugh. Not a warm laugh, not a hearty one. It sounded dry, brittle, like old wood about to splinter. First quietly, then louder, until he coughed. But even as he coughed, he didn't stop, as if the sound had unleashed something inside him that could no longer be silenced.

Toad, who never cried, wiped his eyes and sobbed quietly into his dirty hands. "Too much," he murmured over and over again. "Too much." We didn't know what he meant—whether it was the sound itself or something he'd heard inside.

Borke, the strongest of us, became restless. His muscles tensed, his veins bulged, and suddenly he began grabbing ropes, tugging at them as if he had to tear something invisible apart. Every sound had drilled deep into his strength, and now he wanted to tear it out, no matter how.

And myself? I could still feel the sound in my teeth, vibrating, buzzing, as if it had lodged itself in my skull. Images rose up that I had long wanted to forget—faces of men I had pushed overboard, hands reaching for me in the depths. The whistle had called them back, and they wouldn't let me go.

But the helmsman just grinned. He looked at us, one by one, and his smile wasn't that of a man playing music—but that of a man who knows he's holding us all together by an invisible thread.

Then we realized: The sound wasn't a song. It was a key. And we were the door.

The whistle wouldn't let us go. As soon as the first note faded away, the men began to whisper. No one spoke loudly, but every whisper crept across the planks like a drop of oil, growing larger and larger.

"A whale," said one. "Cut from the ribs. That's why it sounds so deep."
"Nonsense," muttered another, "a piece of a shark, maybe, or a large bird. It's ivory, nothing more."

But the voices quickly shifted. An old sailor with glazed eyes swore he'd seen something like this before, with a crew that never returned. "That wasn't an animal," he whispered. "That was a man. A bone of someone who lived here, laughed... and prayed he wouldn't go overboard."

No one laughed. Because in the grooves of the pipe was something too fine for animals. A grain that was more reminiscent of hands than fins.

We asked the helmsman where he got the thing. He just grinned crookedly. "Found it," he said. That's all. But his eyes sparkled, as if he knew exactly what we suspected—and as if he liked the idea of us not sleeping with it on.

"Human bones," someone finally whispered. He spoke barely audibly, but we all heard it. It hung in the air, heavy and cold. And no one objected.

Because whether it was true or not, the whistle sounded like it knew us all.

When the first notes had faded away and the men whispered like crows in the fog, the captain came on deck. Not hastily, not curiously—he simply appeared as if he had already been there.

The whistle still hung in the helmsman's fingers, white, shimmering in the dim lantern light. Everyone waited for a word, a gesture, an order. But the captain remained silent.

He sucked on his pipe, letting the smoke rise from his nose as if the whole scene belonged to him. His gaze wandered briefly over us, then settled on the small white thing. Only for a heartbeat—but long enough for us to realize: He knew it.

The men sensed it immediately. "He knows something," one murmured. "He's heard it before." But the captain said nothing. No prohibition, no curse, no laughter. Just this silence, which was heavier than any storm.

Some interpreted his silence as consent. Others as a warning. But no one dared to ask again. Because everyone sensed that the pipe wasn't new to them. Perhaps it was even an old acquaintance.

The helmsman grinned crookedly and didn't blow another note, but he seemed satisfied that the captain didn't intervene. As if the silence itself was permission.

From then on, the whistle was no longer just something one of us pulled out of our pockets. It was something even the captain knew—and that made it even heavier.

Because when the captain remains silent, you know: there are things he is not allowed to say.

The nights that followed were different. Harder. Everyone slept more easily, tossed and turned more often, and cursed in their dreams. We didn't talk about it, but everyone knew: It was the pipe.

For soon they were heard again. Not by day, not in the hands of the helmsman—but deep in the night.

A thin sound, barely more than a whisper, drifted across the planks. At first we thought it was just the wind. But it lasted too long, too steadily. No creaking, no whistling in the sails—no, that was the sound of the bone whistle, played by someone not on deck.

One of them sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Helmsman?" he asked into the darkness. But the helmsman was curled up in his hammock, his back to us, his hands empty. And yet the pipe continued to play.

The sound moved across the ship. Sometimes it seemed to come from above, from the masthead. Sometimes from the belly of the ship. Sometimes very close, right next to your ear, so close that you thought someone must be standing behind you. But there was no one there. Just the sound.

Some men woke up drenched in sweat, their hands over their ears, muttering incoherently. One swore he heard voices accompanying the sound—quiet, scratchy, as if singing a song no one was supposed to understand. Another claimed to have heard footsteps on the deck, walking in time to the whistle.

And me? I lay awake, my eyes staring into the darkness. The sound crept through the planks, vibrated in the wood, settled in my ribs. It felt as if the ship itself were breathing—and the whistle was its lungs.

In the morning, no one talked about it. Not because we had forgotten. But because we knew: If the whistle played by itself at night, it wasn't a coincidence. It was a response.

In the end, we knew: The thing wasn't an instrument. It was a piece of body. A bone that wouldn't shut up.

The men encouraged each other, saying it was just a whale, just a shark, just some animal long forgotten. But no one truly believed it. For the sound was too close, too human, too familiar. It scratched in their ears like a voice they once knew and can never get rid of.

The helmsman rarely blew it during the day. He grinned crookedly every time, as if he knew he was tormenting us. But at night, the whistle played by itself. Thin, long, sometimes barely audible. And if you listened closely, you could hear something beneath it: a whisper, an echo, like words coming from very far away.

"They're answering," the old Norwegian murmured one morning, his eyes red, his hands shaking. "Out there. Someone is answering." He was laughed at, half-heartedly, nervously. But everyone knew: He was right.

The captain said nothing. He didn't need to say anything. His silence was answer enough. He puffed on his pipe, while the bone pipe lay in the shadows—and it looked as if he were listening to two conversations at once.

And me? I realized we weren't just sailing on a ship. We were sailing on a calling. Every note of the whistle was a message, a signal going out, far across the sea, into something we couldn't see. And each time, something came back. Not yet clear, not yet loud—but it was coming.

The whistle wasn't a tool. It was a key. And if you blow into it long enough, eventually a door will open.

A door that would have been better left closed.

Sharks always smell the money first

It began on a hot day, with the sun hanging in the sky like a rusty nail. The sea lay flat and clear, so calm that even the seagulls were silent. And then we saw them.

At first, just one fin. Black, pointed, it glided through the water as if connected to the ship. A shadow beneath it, large, slow, patient. Then a second. Then three. Soon a dozen. Sharks.

They didn't swim wildly, nor greedily. They didn't hunt. They accompanied us, like a convoy. Every movement smooth, every turn calm. As if they had time. And that's exactly what made it worse. Because you can outsmart a hungry animal, but patience is more deadly.

One of the men spat over the railing. The saliva fell into the water, and immediately a fin sliced through the spot, as if the drop had been enough to lure it in. "They smell us," he murmured, his voice hoarse. "They know we're coming for it."

We didn't laugh. No one laughed. Because the sharks stayed. Hour after hour, they circled. Sometimes closer, sometimes wider. Sometimes they disappeared into the depths, but only to resurface shortly afterwards. Always within sight, always there.

The ship creaked in the sun, the water glittered, and yet it felt as if we were already a wreck. A wreck they just hadn't nibbled on yet.

The men began to get nervous. Some avoided the railing, others stared down, mesmerized, as if they could read something in the sharks' black eyes. And I swear to you, comrade: those eyes read back.

It wasn't a normal escort. It was waiting. A bailiff standing at your door, knowing you can't pay the debt anyway.

And we all felt it: the sea had marked us.

The sharks swam on, hour after hour, as if they were already part of the crew. And at some point, it wasn't the sea that worried us anymore – it was our thoughts. For one of us said, half-aloud, almost casually:

"They're not waiting for blood. They're waiting for gold."

That was the spark. It was there immediately – the old mistrust. One of them grinned crookedly and shrugged: "One of you bastards has something hidden. I bet it's a bag of coins. And those beasts down there can smell it."

No one objected. Not loudly. But the glances grew longer, sharper. Everyone was checking each other out. Who still had too much in their bag? Who was sleeping too restlessly? Who was holding their jacket too close to their body at night?

Toad giggled nervously. "I know someone's got something. I heard him murmuring in his sleep: 'My gold, my gold...'" He grinned through his stumps of teeth as if he'd just revealed a secret worth more than any coin.

The men moved apart. Suddenly, everyone was a suspect. The rum flowed faster, the words grew harsher. It wasn't long before the first threats were uttered. One grabbed the Norwegian by the collar and whispered in his ear: "If you have something and the sharks take it because of you, you'll be the first to go overboard."

The sea cracked, the ship groaned, and the fins cut closer around us as if they had heard and understood the argument.

From then on, it wasn't just a fear of sharks. It was a fear of each other. And that's worse, comrade. Because a shark eats you quickly. But a human eats you slowly – with looks, with suspicion, with silent greed.

The fins continued to circle, and soon the men swore the sea itself was whispering. Not loudly, not with words—more like a humming you feel in your head if you stare into the water long enough.

"They don't want meat," murmured the Spaniard, his eyes glazed over. "They always get meat. This is different." He leaned over the railing as if listening to the singing of the fins. "They smell wealth."

A few laughed, nervously, too loudly. "Wealth? We're beggars on a rotten barrel, nothing more." But even those who laughed involuntarily clutched their bags tighter.

Then someone said, almost in a whisper, almost like a prayer: “Sharks smell the money first.”

Silence. Even the wind was silent. Only the fins, black and pointed, circling the ship like quills signing a contract.

And suddenly it made sense. Why they were so patient, so steady, so close, yet not grasping. They weren't waiting for blood. Blood was cheap. But gold—gold was the real loot. Gold meant guilt. Gold meant stories that ran deeper than any wound.

The old Norwegian spat over the side, his face pale. "Money attracts worse than blood. Blood is only life. Money is soul." He crossed himself, his fingers trembling.

From then on, the men whispered more quietly, held their bags tighter, and looked at each other with different eyes. Not as brothers, not as fellow sufferers. But as men who knew: One of them was carrying something that would drag us all to ruin.

And below us, in the water, the sharks glided with a calmness sharper than any blade. Patient. Ready. They knew what we wouldn't admit: There was more on this ship than hunger. There was guilt. And guilt is the sweetest blood.

From then on, no sleep was peaceful. Everyone looked at each other differently—no longer as sailors, but as damned treasure chests hiding something.

At first, it was just hints. "You're sleeping restlessly, friend—are you dreaming of your gold?" One grinned crookedly, but the grin was cold, and the other

clenched his fist. Then the words became harsher. "I saw you wrapping something." - "Liar!" - "We'll see when you're asleep."

Stories bubbled out of them, whether true or made up, it didn't matter. One said the Norwegian had stolen a sack of silver years ago and hidden it. Another swore that Toad had never handed over everything he had bagged during the last raid. And Borke, the giant, roared that he knew one of us had hidden coins in the planks.

The voices grew louder, the laughter more bitter. Every sentence a dagger, every look a knife. We drank more rum, not out of joy, but because it was easier to suspect the other when our tongues were loose.

One of them took out his knife and slammed it into the table, the blade vibrating. "If I hear the word gold one more time," he growled, "I'll kill the next person who says it." But no one believed him. Because the next morning, he himself spoke of coins that had supposedly disappeared.

The sea remained calm, but the fins grew in number. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, difficult to count. They swam closer together, so close that at times you thought the shadows were already touching the hull.

And then we realized: The sea was listening. It absorbed every word, every confession, every lie. And the sharks were its scribes, waiting patiently until someone paid.

It wasn't just hunger on board anymore. It was greed. And greed is worse. Greed eats you from the inside until you jump into the water yourself, just to get rid of the suspicion.

It had to happen: someone lost their nerve. It was the Spaniard, a thin dog with eyes like coals and hands that constantly trembled. He stood at the railing, looking down into the blackness where the fins intersected, steady, calm, impatient. Then he reached into his pocket.

He pulled out a small pouch, worn leather. It contained no great treasure, just a few coins, but they clinked as he lifted them. The men immediately fell silent. Every eye was glued to the pouch, every breath held.

"If that's what you want," he murmured, as if speaking not to us but to the shadows in the water, "then take it." And he threw the coins into the sea.

They fell, glittering briefly in the lantern light, then disappeared into the depths. A dull splash, and they were gone.

The men stared down, holding their breath. And then it happened: The sharks became more numerous. Much more. As if the sound of the coins in the water had given a signal. Fins appeared, ever closer together, ever faster, a surging blackness beneath us.

“By God,” one whispered, “they called.”

The sharks swam closer, cutting right along the hull. Their dorsal fins almost scraped the planks, so close that you could have touched them if you leaned forward far enough. And their circles became tighter and tighter, until they almost encircled the ship itself.

The Spaniard stepped back, his eyes wide. "I gave it... I gave it!" he cried, his voice half anger, half fear. But no one comforted him. Because we all saw what really happened: It wasn't a ransom. It was a promise.

The sea had tasted not blood, but guilt. And guilt makes you hungrier than anything else.

The men whispered again, this time harsher, more bitter. "One isn't enough. One has to give his all." - "Or one has to go."

And beneath us, the fins rubbed together as if they knew we were thinking exactly that.

The commotion grew louder, voices grew louder, hands grabbed at collars, knives flashed in the lantern light. Everyone wanted to swear they had nothing. Everyone wanted to scream that the other was the culprit. And then he stepped forward—the captain.

He didn't come in a hurry, nor with a raised voice. He simply stepped out of the shadows, puffed on his pipe, and blew the smoke into the night. The creaking of the planks seemed to grow heavier with each step, as if the ship were listening.

He didn't look at us, or at the men who were practically at each other's throats. His gaze was directed downwards. At the fins that calmly circled, ever closer together, ever more numerous. He sucked on his pipe, nodding almost imperceptibly, as if acknowledging the animals' patience.

Then he spoke, so quietly that we all had to be quiet to hear him:

"Gold is heavier than blood. And both attract sharks."

He said nothing more. No command, no shout. Just this sentence, which sounded like a judgment.

The men fell silent. Knives slid back into their belts, hands detached from collars. But the looks remained suspicious, harder than ever. For his words hadn't taken away their fear—they had only rearranged it.

We understood: It didn't matter who carried what. It didn't matter whether someone had hidden a bag of coins under their hammock or not. The sea had known this for a long time. The sharks had known this. And they wouldn't leave until they got what they deserved.

The captain turned around and walked back into the darkness. The whistle glowed. And no one dared to stop him. Because everyone knew: He was right. Gold wasn't treasure. Gold was a debt. And debt always sinks.

In the morning, the sea was as smooth as a mirror, but the sharks were still there. Fins, dozens, hundreds, hard to count. They circled like accountants patiently crunching the numbers until the math is right.

No one spoke of gold, but everyone thought about it. Every hand movement was harder, every gesture more suspicious. Even while eating, the men kept their gazes deep into their bowls, as if they wanted to avoid each other's eyes. Because eyes don't lie when someone is hiding something.

Sometimes the water glittered, and we swore we saw something glimmering down there. Not the sun, not the sea—but something too heavy to float. Something that had already fallen. Perhaps coins. Perhaps entire chests. Perhaps the debts of crews who had sailed before us.

The sharks remained silent, patient. None jumped. None bit. They waited. And their waiting was worse than any attack. Because we knew: They aren't hungry. They're bankers. And bankers have time.

"They don't just take gold," murmured one, "they take everything. In the end, even us." And he was right. For at sea, there is no difference between blood and coins. Both sink. Both ultimately belong to the sea. The captain stepped to the railing once more, looked down, and puffed on his pipe. He said nothing. But his look betrayed that he had known this for a long time: The sharks were

not animals. They were collectors. And we all had debts, whether we admitted it or not. And so they swam on, tirelessly, like numbers in a book that is never closed. We sailed, and they sailed with us, side by side, like silent witnesses.

In the end, we realized: There are no riches, no profits at sea. Only loans. And at some point, repayment will come.

The sharks were just there to remind us.

Mutiny in the belly of the ship

Below deck, the air was thicker than any curse. Salt, sweat, rum, and the creaking of the planks – a mixture that ate into the lungs. Men lay in their hammocks, staring into the darkness, talking in their sleep or whispering while awake. And each of these whispers was a drop in a barrel that had long since overflowed.

Hunger gnawed at them. Not because there was nothing to eat, but because there was never enough. Thin rations, hard bread, meat that tasted more of tar than animal. Every bite was counted, every crumb eyed suspiciously. "He's taken more," was the quick response. "He's stolen something from me." And before anyone could even utter "nonsense," two fists were already in the air.

Sleep didn't help. Some woke up drenched in sweat, screaming of ghosts and whistles, of laughter that wouldn't die down. Others lay awake, staring into the darkness, listening to the breathing of their comrades, and wondering which of them would still be alive tomorrow. For the sea didn't just take through storms and illness. It also took through us.

So it fermented. Every footstep echoed like a blow. Every cough sounded like a command. The ship was full of tensions you could grasp like ropes. And the men were too tense to be sailors anymore. They were powder kegs, stacked tightly together, and all it took was one wrong move for sparks to fly.

The creaking of the ship, usually just background music, now sounded like a mocking laugh. It knew what we didn't want to say out loud: This was no longer a crew. This was a bunch of men who would soon turn on each other.

And I swear, comrade, sometimes, when the sea was particularly quiet, I heard it whisper:*"Mutiny."*

It wasn't long before the whispers grew louder than the rats. Below deck, everyone lay close together, and every breath reeked of suspicion. One started it, another picked up on it, and suddenly it was no longer nonsense, but truth—because enough men repeated it.

"The captain sold us long ago," one whispered in a hoarse voice. "He's no longer human, he belongs to the sea." "Nonsense," another snarled, "it's the helmsman. His whistle plays itself at night. It lures the spirits who will come and get us." "Nonsense," whispered a third, "it's the sharks. He secretly feeds them, I saw it."

So every rumor grew like mold on moist bread. Everyone swore they'd heard or seen something: a shadow in the fog, a look from the captain who knew too much, a creak in the wood that sounded like laughter. And when someone swore they'd heard a dead man's name called in their sleep, the others nodded. No one contradicted them.

The rumors swirled around like sharks around the ship. Sometimes it was the captain, sometimes the helmsman, sometimes one of us. But it was always someone who had to be blamed. Because no one could bear to think that it was all just coincidence. Coincidence doesn't eat ships. But a traitor does.

And so we whispered, hour after hour, night after night. First only quietly, then louder, until the murmuring sounded like a choir. A choir of mistrust, anger, and naked fear.

Sometimes I swore the ship itself was listening. That it was absorbing the words like smoke, holding them in its belly and making them heavier. That every curse, every rumor, stuck to the planks like pitch.

And while the captain maintained his silence above, another law grew below. One that knew no silence, only mistrust.

The whispers didn't stay whispers. They turned into glances, into gestures, into silent agreements. Men who were fighting yesterday sat next to each other today, sharing a piece of bread, a sip of rum, a knife that gleamed longer than necessary.

You could see it like a fever spreading. Two or three together, whispering, secretly lurking. One stood guard while the others pretended to play cards. But the cards were just a cover. The real conversation was the words they exchanged. Short sentences, brief nods, lots of silence.

Alliances grew in the shadows. Some swore to overthrow the captain, others only to save their own skins. And in between, there were those who reached out to both sides, ultimately standing on the one that remained stronger.

Below deck, small camps formed, invisible boundaries that everyone knew about. On the left were those who still believed in the captain. On the right were those who had long since considered him a traitor. In between were the undecided—and they were the most dangerous. Because the undecided always fall first.

Rum flowed more than necessary, and every bottle shared was a mini-contract. "You give me this, I'll give you that. And when it all starts, you're on my side." Such deals were worth more than coins.

I swear to you, comrade: You could hear it in the wood. The ship creaked differently, as if the planks had understood that the crew was no longer a crew. They were a pack. And packs know only one thing: fighting for meat.

The sea was calm, the ship sailed on. But inside, a storm brewed, worse than any the sky and waves could ever conjure.

It didn't take much. In the end, it's never much. Not a storm, not a gunshot, not a devil. It was just a bowl.

Dinner was meager: a pot of thin stew, more water than meat. The men lined up, their eyes hollow, their hands greedy. One scooped, passed on, the next grumbled because his spoon was too empty. Then he growled, "You took more."

“Shut up,” the other snapped back, “I only got my share.”

A shove. A grab of the arm. A push against the wall. The bowl flew, clattering, the thin stew seeping down the planks like a drop of blood.

Silence. For a brief moment, only silence. Then fists flew. One stumbled into a hammock, pulling a third with him. The third roared, drew his knife. Suddenly there were five in the melee, ten.

"Mutiny!" someone shouted, so shrill that it went right through my bones. No cry, no plan—just a word that was there, inevitable. And the ship heard it, the whole damned ship.

The men grabbed for everything they had: knives, axes, sticks. The cracking of wood, the clanging of iron, the panting of men who no longer knew whether they were sailors or murderers.

The word "mutiny" hung in the air, like smoke that couldn't be waved away. Someone shouted it again, louder, this time like a command. "MUTINY!"

And that was it. The line had been crossed. No turning back. No "We were just fighting." It was a revolt born from a bowl of stew, fed by mistrust, soaked with greed.

The ship groaned deeply, as if it had only been waiting for this.

The lower deck exploded. Not with gunpowder and fire—but with men yelling at each other like animals. Narrow planks, low ceiling, barely any room to breathe—and yet it was enough to unleash a storm.

Fists cracked, teeth splintered, knives flashed like tiny lightning bolts in the darkness. Everyone grabbed something: an end of rope, a cup, a piece of wood. Everything became a weapon because everything was one hand too many.

One grabbed the Norwegian and slammed his skull against the planks until the wood creaked. Another lunged at Toad like a dog, and the two rolled across the floor, screaming, panting, more growling than speaking. Pushes, screams, a chaos that had no beginning and no end.

The air was thick, stuffy, tasting of salt, iron, and fear. Lanterns swung, casting flickering shadows that looked like more men joining the fray. Soon, you couldn't tell whether you were fighting the enemy or your own reflection in the flickering light.

The ship itself joined in. Every kick, every thrust echoed, as if the planks were fighting with us. The creaking became a roar, the wood vibrated under the blows. It was as if the ship were laughing, laughing at us, tearing each other apart like rats in a barrel.

One shouted, "For the captain!" – another, "Down with him!" And suddenly there were two camps, no longer men against men, but faith against faith. A storm raged in the belly of the ship, and no one knew who would calm it.

I swear to you, comrade: That night, it wasn't the sea that smelled of blood. It was our own ship.

Amidst the commotion, as knives glistened with blood and voices cried hoarsely, the stairs creaked. Heavy. Slow. Every thud of the steps announced him before he was seen. The captain descended.

No scream, no thunder, no sword in hand. Only him. The pipe in his mouth, smoke curling lazily in the stifling air. The scar across his chest stretched in the wavering light, like a line that bore more weight than any knife in the room.

The men saw him, one by one. Fists remained half-aired, knives trembled, paused. Even the rats scurrying between the planks seemed to be waiting.

He didn't speak immediately. He let the silence do the work. And the silence was heavy, it settled on his chest, constricting every lung. Then, after a long drag on his pipe, he simply said:

"Wolves kill wolves. But the sea eats them all."

No order, no threat. Just a sentence so dry it burned into my bones.

And it worked. The men sank back, one by one. Knives slid deeper, fists unclenched. No one wanted to be the first to continue fighting that gaze. Because in his eyes was something worse than any death: indifference. He would have abandoned us all, and we knew it.

He didn't turn around, didn't linger to explain. He climbed back up, step by step, as if he'd never been down. But his silence remained, like a weight filling the room.

And we stood there, panting, covered in blood, but suddenly silent. Not because we understood each other. But because he reminded us: We were not masters of this ship. Not masters of the sea. Just rats in its belly.

The fists fell, the knives disappeared, but the wound remained. Below deck it was quiet, yes—but it wasn't calm. It was this silence that echoed louder than any scream.

The men stood there, breathing heavily, their eyes flickering like lanterns in the wind. Everyone knew: Nothing was really over. It had only paused because the captain wanted it that way. His sentence still hung in the air, dry as dust:*"Wolves kill wolves. But the sea eats them all."*

We looked at each other—not like brothers, but like men already calculating in their heads who they'd grab first next time. Distrust glistened like sweat on

their skin. Some had blood on their hands, others on their foreheads. And yet no one pretended it was an accident. Everyone knew what had happened: The word "mutiny" had been spoken. It couldn't be taken back.

The hammocks creaked as the men flung themselves back into them, but no one slept. Rum bottles passed silently from hand to hand, as if they were the last contracts holding us together. A few laughed briefly, brittlely, forcedly—but the laughter was dead before it was born.

The ship breathed deeply, slowly, as if it were full. Perhaps from our hatred, perhaps from our fear. The planks creaked in time with our thoughts, and everyone knew: the belly of the ship had tasted what we carried within us.

From then on, we no longer sailed as a crew. We sailed as a pack, each for ourselves, each ready to abandon the other. And the sea was waiting for us to do so.

The wound didn't heal. It remained open, like salt in the flesh. And everyone suspected: The next mutiny would come. Not sometime soon. Soon.

The scream in the masthead

It was a quiet night, far too quiet for men accustomed to thunder, blood, and curses. The sky hung clear, the stars sparkled like silver pieces one could never reach. And the sea lay there, smooth, motionless—as if it itself were holding its breath.

"One up to the crow's nest," commanded the helmsman, and all eyes turned to the youngest. He was barely more than a lad, too young for the scars we bore, too old to run away. They called him "the Bird" because he could climb nimbly and showed no fear of heights.

So he climbed. His hands firmly on the rope, his feet skillfully on the rungs. The ship creaked beneath him, but he kept climbing, higher, until the deck became small, like a toy box full of shadows. The men's voices faded, the sea became a gray carpet beneath his shoes.

Once at the top, he sat in the crow's nest, pulled his knees up, and let his gaze wander. From there, the sea seemed more endless, more merciless. A realm without shores, where a ship was merely a crumb.

The wind reached out, blew through his hair, whispered in his ears. At first, it was just the whistling sound every sail hears. But then… then it sounded different. As if there was more. A whisper that wasn't just air. Words you could almost understand, but not quite.

The boy shivered. He peered down, saw the men on deck like little figures, saw the captain, motionless, pipe in his mouth. No one looked up at him. He was alone up there. Alone with the wind.

And I swear to you, comrade: At that altitude, it wasn't just keeping watch. It was listening. Listening for things that no one down below was allowed to hear.

The night remained clear, so clear it almost hurt. No thunder, no fog, no storm. Only stars burning silently above him, and the sea not moving. But it was precisely this calm that made the boy uneasy. Too still, too smooth, too clean.

The wind whistled around the sails, beat against the masthead, and tugged at the ropes. At first, it was just the normal singing of the wood, familiar to every sailor. But after a while, he heard it differently. Not just whistling. Not just rustling. Words.

He shook his head and rubbed his ears, but it didn't help. Something was becoming increasingly clear in his hearing. A whisper, soft, almost sweet, as if someone were speaking directly into his ear. "Come... come..."

He leaned over the masthead rail, staring into the depths. Down below, far beneath him, was the ship. Small, strange, lost. The men moved like shadows that had nothing to do with him. And yet he swore the voices didn't come from there. They came from above. From heaven itself.

The whispering grew louder. Now it was no longer just individual syllables, but entire sentences – fragile, indistinct, but close. Sometimes it sounded like a woman's voice, sometimes like that of a child, sometimes like a man he had long forgotten. Every wave of the wind brought a new echo.

His heart pounded. He pressed his hands against his ears, but the wind still penetrated, crept in, vibrated in his bones. The silence beneath him, the unmoving water—it only made everything worse. As if the sea were holding its breath so he could hear what they were whispering to him above.

And then he realized: This silence wasn't peace. It was a trap. A stage. The wind wanted him to listen.

Then it came. Not a whisper, not a screech. A scream.

It burst from him like lightning that needs no heaven. High, shrill, sharp like a nail driven through flesh. A scream that ripped open the entire ship like a knife cutting into a drum.

The men on deck froze. Fists in mid-air, voices in mid-curse, every head jerked up. The scream continued to echo, vibrating in the sails, creeping into the woodwork as if the entire ship were singing along.

It wasn't a cry for help. Not a "Man overboard!" or a "Storm!" It was something else. A sound that named nothing, but everything. Fear, pain, madness—all in one, so raw that it seemed to split the sky itself.

One murmured, "That's not a human being anymore." Another made the sign of the cross. And I swear, comrade, I heard more than one voice in that scream. There were others inside. Women, men, children—as if the wind had gathered all their screams and pushed them through his throat.

The sound lingered, longer than possible. No breath could have carried it like that. It vibrated across the sea, drifting into the distance, and we knew: whoever was out there had heard it.

And then—silence. Suddenly. Abruptly. So heavy that the silence itself reverberated.

We stood below, heads thrown back, mouths open. And up there, in the crow's nest, was only a shadow. Stiff. Motionless. Too far away to tell if it was still alive.

The scream had struck us all. But it had swallowed the boy.

The deck was full of eyes, all staring upward, all equally wide open like mouths that couldn't find a word. The scream still hung in our ears, vibrating as if it had been burned into our skulls.

"Someone up!" the helmsman finally shouted, but his voice sounded weaker than he intended. No one moved. One stepped back as if the order had been grabbed by the throat. Another laughed nervously, his laughter breaking right through him.

"I'm not going," growled Borke, who usually stood at the front when things got tough. "Up there... something's going to get you up there." "Nonsense," someone shouted back, but his gaze remained on the ground, not on the mast.

The lanterns flickered, the sail flapped softly, and the masthead above remained a dark shadow against the stars. Nothing moved. No waving, no shouting. Only this frozen blackness, staring at us, eyeless.

One murmured, "Maybe he's already gone." "Gone where?" asked another, and no one answered.

A few grabbed the ropes, trying to climb, but their hands trembled, then let go again. "Not for ten barrels of rum," one blurted out. "Not even if the captain commands it." And the captain? He remained silent. He simply stood at the bow, pipe in hand, the smoke smoldering as if it didn't belong to our world.

We remained below, petrified, caught between duty and fear. The masthead was no longer a workstation, no longer a lookout. It was a maw that had swallowed a man and would soon sweep away anyone who tried to follow.

And so we waited. Waited for the shadow to move. But it didn't move.

And the silence that remained after the scream was worse than the scream itself.

It took an eternity before anyone moved. Finally, it was the Scotsman, who was usually the most silent, who did it. Without a word, he took the rope and wrapped his hands around it, his muscles hard as iron. Two men followed him, more out of defiance than courage. They didn't want to appear cowards while the ship stared at them.

Slowly they pulled themselves up. Every handle creaked, every footstep echoed through the mast. We below held our breath, staring upwards as if our own fate hung in their hands.

The masthead came closer, and the flickering of the lanterns was just enough to catch a glimpse of its outline. But there was nothing. No boy, no shadow, just the ropes swaying in the wind.

The Scotsman climbed over the edge and leaned in. A curse, quiet but sharp. We below listened. "What?" someone shouted. But he didn't answer immediately. Instead, he bent down further, reaching for something.

Then his voice came, muffled: “He’s not here.”

Unrest raged across the deck. "What—not here?" "Away," one of the other two yelled from above. "No body. No blood. Just that."

They were holding something up. From below, we could barely see it, except that it was fluttering: a piece of rope, frayed, torn, as if something had bitten through it. And next to it hung a scrap of fabric that must have once belonged to a shirt.

Nothing more. No more feet, no more hands, no more screams. Only tracks that led nowhere.

"He can't have jumped," someone murmured below, "that high..." But the sea was silent. No splash, no commotion, nothing but stillness.

The men climbed back down, more slowly, as if carrying a burden heavier than the boy himself. When they stood back on deck, it was clear: He hadn't fallen, he hadn't jumped. He had been rescued. By whom—or what—no one knew.

And that made it worse than any corpse.

The men stood close together, heads bowed, eyes empty. No one wanted to look at the other, no one wanted to ask what we were all thinking:*What takes a man up there without leaving a trace?*

Then the captain stepped to the railing. Not hastily, not heavily, but as calmly as if it were just another evening without any particularity. His pipe glowed, smoke curled into the night. He positioned himself so that the wind carried the smoke outward, out to sea, as if he wanted to send it to someone.

We waited to see if he would shout orders. Whether he would scold us or calm us down. But he just looked up, into the empty masthead, then down at the sea. For a long time, in silence, as if he were listening to a conversation only he could understand.

Finally, he spoke. Not loudly, not for everyone, but enough so that every ear could hear him:

“Up above you hear first what’s coming down below.”

That was all. No explanation, no consolation. Just this sentence, heavy as an anchor.

The men were silent, even more silent than before. Some stared at him, others stepped back, as if more afraid of his words than of the masthead itself.

The captain turned around and went back to his seat, his pipe in his mouth, as if nothing had happened. But his sentence lingered like a curse. Because we knew what he meant: The boy wasn't an accident. He was a harbinger.

And if the masthead screams first, the deck will eventually scream afterward.

Since that night, the masthead was no longer a lookout point. It was a gallows. Everyone who was supposed to go up there knew it.

The men avoided the heights as long as possible. Orders were obeyed more slowly, and glances darted nervously upwards, where the masthead hung black against the stars. Even in broad daylight, when the sun burned mercilessly, a shadow hung over the masthead that no light could erase.

If one was sent, he hesitated. Some needed a kick, others a sip of rum before they touched the ropes. And once they were up there, they held their breath, hardly daring to move. As if listening for the wind to whisper again.

The word "scream" was no longer used. It was circumscribed, repressed, hushed up. But it was there in every look. In every gesture, in every nervous laugh. We knew: the next sound would come. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow – but it would come.

Some claimed to hear footsteps upstairs at night, quiet and steady. Others swore a shadow was crouching in the basket, even though no one was there. We stopped laughing about it. Because no one wanted to prove it was wrong.

From then on, every watch was a death sentence. Not immediate, not certain—but a lot that could be drawn. Every step up the rung was a prayer no one said aloud.

And the worst part: We were all waiting. Not if, just when. When the next scream would come. And whether it would be human—or not.

Black sails against the moon

The night was too bright, to be honest. The moon hung like a shiny plate in the sky, shimmering, almost mocking, casting its light across the sea until the water looked like a reflective surface of cold metal. No wind, no clouds, nothing to break the silence. It was the kind of calm that turned every sailor's stomach because it was too perfect, too clean, too smooth.

The men stood scattered across the deck, some with their hands deep in their pockets, others leaning against the railing. No one spoke much. Everyone sensed that the night had something in its belly that hadn't yet been born.

And then we saw it.

On the horizon, where the moon crossed the line of the sea, a shadow appeared. Small at first, so small that it seemed like a speck in the eye. But it grew, slowly, evenly. A triangle, then two, then three. Sails.

But no white ones. No gray ones. Black. Deep black, as if they had swallowed all light. No shade, no shimmer, just pure darkness. They stood against the moon like scars on skin that will never heal.

One of the boys whispered, “Sail…” and his voice broke as if he had said a word that shouldn’t have been said.

The men crowded around the railing, staring out. And the longer we looked, the clearer it became: This was no ordinary ship. No wind drove those sails, no water broke against their bows. They glided along, silent, like a shadow that had decided to become visible.

The ship with the black sails came closer. And the moon shone brighter, as if it wanted not only to show us, but to force us to look.

And none of us dared to look away.

It wasn't long before the whispering began. No one wanted to speak out loud, no one wanted to tell the moon too much—but the words found their way anyway, flitting from mouth to mouth.

"Black sails," murmured one, "bring no home." "No ship with such canvas has ever returned," whispered another, and he spoke it as if it were an old prayer one does not like to repeat. "That is death itself," said a third, and his voice trembled, although he never usually showed fear.

The boys were the first to turn pale. Their eyes stared wide and empty at the horizon, as if they saw an animal that already knew their name. Some backed away, pushing themselves deeper into the shadows, as if hoping to be invisible there.

But the old ones didn't laugh, didn't mock, didn't curse. They stood still, their faces hard, their gazes deep. They knew what the young ones only suspected: Black sails are no coincidence. They are a sign.

One told of a ship spotted in the channel years ago. Black sails, large and silent, and by morning it had disappeared—along with two other ships that had set sail at the same time. Another swore he'd heard as a child that only those who deserve to see black sails see them.

And so fear grew like mold in damp wood. Everyone suddenly had a story, everyone had heard of them before. And everyone knew: No fairy tale lasts that long unless there's some truth to it.

No one asked out loud what we were all thinking.*Why us?*

But the moon didn't answer. It just shone brighter, as if it wanted to laugh at us.

The ship with the black sails didn't linger on the horizon. It glided closer, slowly, steadily, as surely as if the ocean had been made just for it. No wind drove it, no sail flapped, no wave broke against its bow. It didn't sail as ships sail. It glided like a shadow that had decided to take shape.

The men held their breath. Even those who usually greeted every danger with a curse stood still. No coughing, no throat clearing, no spitting. Only eyes following the darkness that was spreading ever larger across the surface.

The moonlight made the cloth of the sails shine, but not like ordinary cloth. It seemed neither woven nor sewn. More like skin. Black, taut, full of a weight that was otherworldly. And as it drew closer, it seemed to swallow the light itself, as if it carried the night within itself, no matter how bright the sky.

"Why can't we hear it?" someone whispered next to me. And he was right. No creaking, no banging, no lapping of waves. Normally, a ship announces its arrival—wood groaning, water parting. But here, there was nothing. Only silence.

It was as if it weren't gliding over the sea, but through something else. As if the water were merely a backdrop that it ignored.

And with every meter it came closer, the fear grew. Not because it threatened us, but because it reflected us: a ship that looked like us—only emptier, darker, more final.

The moon stood behind him, large and bright, and the sails cut through its light like black blades.

And I swear to you, comrade: at that moment it was as if heaven itself was looking at us – and it was not pleased with what it saw.

The ship came so close that we could make out its outline. A hull black as tar, without lights, without lanterns. Only the moon, tracing its edges like chalk on slate. It sailed silently alongside us, as if it had always been there.

The men crowded around the railing. Some held their breath, others murmured prayers they hadn't uttered in years. One spat into the sea, but even the splash sounded muffled, as if the water didn't want to disturb anything.

And then we saw her.

Figures. Shadows on the deck of the alien ship. They stood motionless, shoulder to shoulder, like a crew not breathing. No faces, just outlines – and yet… everyone swore they recognized something.

"That's Bark," whispered one, "look at those shoulders..." "Nonsense," hissed another, but his voice broke. "That's me."

And indeed, the longer one looked, the more it seemed as if we were staring at ourselves. Like mirror images, distorted, wrapped in black cloth. Some swore they saw their own movements there, slightly displaced, as if the other ship were pulling the strings of our bodies.

No sound came from across the water. No command, no shout, no greeting. Just the silent coexistence. Two ships scrutinizing each other—or rather, one showing us how we would end up.

“It’s us,” whispered the Norwegian, “only… already over there.” He pressed his hands against the railing as if trying to hold on.

The sea between us was smooth, too smooth, as if it knew that no waves could disturb this view.

And I swear to you, comrade: in that silence I heard my own heart beating – but I wasn't sure whether it was my heart or that of my reflection over there.

We stared over, our hearts in our throats, our hands clammy on the railings. The shadows over there were still standing, motionless, like a statue of flesh that had long since ceased to breathe. But suddenly—voices.

No shout, no scream, no song. It was quieter. Like a murmur gliding over the water. No wind carried it, no throat spoke it—and yet we heard it.

“Come…” “We’re waiting…” “You’re already with us.”

Some covered their ears, others laughed nervously, as if laughter might break the sound. But it was no use. The voices crept into people's heads, not into the air. They weren't outside, they were inside.

And the shadows on the strange deck? They were moving after all. Slowly, barely visible. A head turning. An arm twitching. A step forward. There was nothing distinct, nothing tangible—and that made it worse. Because each of us swore we saw ourselves over there. The same posture, the same gait, only... emptier.

"That's us," Toad breathed, "that's us when it's over." No one objected. How could they? Who would say they didn't recognize their own face, distorted in the moonlight, burned into black shadows?

The sea was silent, the wood creaked, the sails didn't flutter. Everything stood still. Only the voices remained, cold, urgent, soundless—and yet louder than any storm.

And we realized: That wasn't an enemy, not a stranger. It was a mirror. A glimpse into the future, in which we had long since been recorded.

While we were still staring, his hands sweating on the railing, the captain stepped forward. Not hastily, not yelling—he glided through us as if he knew exactly when his moment would be.

He stood still, his gaze directed across the room. His pipe hung in his mouth, the smoke rising slowly, curling in the cold air. He didn't move, not a finger, not

a muscle. Only his eyes, which surveyed the other ship as if he were reading an old book whose words he had long known.

We waited for him to give us a sign. A command, a shout, something that would tell us whether we should fight or flee. But he did nothing. He just stood there, the scar across his chest gleaming in the moonlight, as if it were itself a line connecting both ships.

Then he spoke. Quietly. Dryly. Without wasting a syllable:

"This is the mirror. What's coming."

The words fell, heavy as lead. No one dared to ask what he meant. We all knew. The ship out there was no stranger, no enemy. It was us. Us, when the road ended. Us, when the sea swallowed us for good.

The captain puffed on his pipe, blew out the smoke as if he'd said his piece, and turned away again. No explanation, no consolation. Only this verdict, which fell like a stone into all of our stomachs.

From then on, no one spoke again. Because what can you say when you see yourself dying?

As night fell and dawn broke, the ship was gone. No more shadow on the horizon, no sail to counter the light. Only the sea, vast and empty, as smooth as if it had never carried anything but us.

The men searched with their eyes, greedily, almost desperately. Some stared into the gray until their eyelids flickered, others cursed because they couldn't believe something so silent could simply be gone. But it was gone. Vanished, as if it had never been there.

And yet it was there. In our minds. Black sails against the moon. Each of us still saw them, every time we closed our eyes. They were burned into our eyelids, like an image we couldn't erase.

We barely spoke. A few tried to ridicule it. "It was just a whim of the moon." - "A shadow in the fog." But no one believed it. Not even them. The silence was stronger, heavier, more honest.

From now on, we knew: Heaven could warn you. And when it did, it wasn't to warn you—but to expect it.

The captain smoked, said nothing. He didn't have to say anything. His sentence from the evening still hung with us:*"This is the mirror. What's coming."*

And so we sailed on. The sea was calm, the sails full. But above everything, above every plank, every rope, hung this image: Black sails in the moonlight. A promise that the end was already on its way.

No captain in sight

The morning came, gray and weary, like any other. The sun climbed lazily over the edge of the world, the sea lay flat and still, and yet something was different. It took a while for us to notice. At first it was just a feeling, a tugging in our stomachs, as if the ship itself was missing something. Then it struck us:

The captain was not on deck.

Normally, he stood there like a rock, pipe in mouth, scar across his chest, eyes fixed on the horizon, whether storm or calm. He needed no words, no gestures—his mere presence was enough to maintain order. But this morning, there was nothing. Just the railing, empty.

At first, no one said anything. One looked around, another coughed, another acted as if he were adjusting a rope. But gradually, everyone noticed. No curt command, no silence that weighed more heavily than thunder.

"He's still asleep," one murmured, too loudly, too quickly. But everyone knew that the captain never slept when we were awake. Another grinned uncertainly: "Maybe he's sitting in the cabin, smoking." But no smoke hung over the deck, no familiar smell of burning tobacco.

It spread like frost: the unrest. Men who had just been working silently looked around, more and more often, for longer and longer periods. One peered into the sky, as if the old man could be sitting up there on a star. Another rapped on the planks as if he had disappeared into the wood.

But what was missing wasn't just a man. It was the weight that held everything together. Without him, the ship was suddenly too big, too empty. Every footstep echoed louder, every movement seemed out of place.

And so we stood there, in the morning light, and knew: Something had gone missing. No wind, no sail, no rope could replace it. The captain was nowhere in sight—and that meant more than we dared to say.

It didn't take long for the silence to break. First a clearing of the throat, then a whisper, then a half-sentence that sliced through the deck like a knife.

"He's overboard."

All eyes immediately turned to the speaker. He just shrugged his shoulders, as if he hadn't said anything. But the word now hung in the air, heavier than a cannonball.

"Nonsense," growled one, "he's not going overboard. Not willingly." "Maybe someone pushed him," whispered another, and immediately everyone took a step back.

But that was just the beginning. Soon, rumors were swirling like rats from a barrel.

"He sold himself to the sea, years ago," said Toad, his voice thin, his eyes glassy. "I always knew it. The scar—that wasn't a cut, that was a seal." "Or he was never real," muttered another, "just a shadow borrowing our form." "He's still here," whispered the Scotsman. "Just not visible. He sees us. He's testing us. From somewhere."

That was the worst part: the idea that he wasn't gone at all. That he was watching us from the sails, from the wood, from the water itself. Every glance at the horizon, every creak of the planks suddenly seemed to be his eye, his ear, his breath.

And so the murmuring grew louder, ever quieter, ever more venomous. No one knew what had happened to him—and that was precisely what consumed us. Because everyone believed something different. And everyone believed the other was lying.

The captain was nowhere in sight. But in our minds, he was bigger than ever.

We had no choice but to search. One started, the others followed, and soon we were crawling all over the ship like bloodhounds, each with the same thought:*Maybe we'll find him. Maybe just a sign.*

We started in the cabin. The door was ajar, which was wrong—the captain never left it open. Inside, it was dark and stuffy. The table was empty except for a few crumbs of tobacco. Ash lay in the bowl, still fresh, as if it had been drawn an hour ago. But no smoke, no one. Only the smell, which lingered like a ghost.

One swore he saw an imprint in the dust, a boot mark pointing toward the door—and then the mark was gone, broken off, as if the footstep had faded away in midair.

We kept searching. The bow, the stern, the hatches. Men lifted planks, peered into crates, as if he could hide in the narrow space like a cat. But there was nothing. Only the creaking of the wood, only the sea pounding against the hull.

At the wheel: empty. The wheel stood still, as if it hadn't been touched for hours. Normally, there was always a trace of his presence, a weight, a look, a whistle in the corner of his mouth. Now – nothing.

The worst thing, though, was how large the ship seemed without him. Every corridor, every hatch seemed longer, wider, emptier. The space where he usually stood gaped like a hole no rope could fill.

"He's not here anymore," someone murmured, his voice shaky. "Not... with us anymore."

But another shook his head, pale as chalk. "He's here. Everywhere. Precisely because we can't find him."

And so we stood on deck, panting from the search, but emptier than before. We had found traces—ash, prints, small items. But no captain.

It was worse than if we had seen him drift overboard.

It took less than an hour for the silence to break and the voices to become harsh. Someone had to hold the wheel, that much was clear. But who?

"I'm telling you," cried Bark, his veins bulging in his neck, "I have the strongest arms, I can hold the wheel when the storm comes. It shall be mine!" "Your hand?" snarled the Scotsman, "you'd steer us into the abyss just because your stomach is crying out for rum." "Better than your mouth," growled Bark, and he grabbed the Scotsman by the collar.

A third, the Spaniard, chimed in: "We don't need either of you. We need reason, not brawn. I've read maps, I know the stars." But immediately, someone laughed mockingly: "Maps? Stars? Ask the sea what it thinks!"

And so it continued, voice after voice, each louder, each sharper. Small groups formed, men lined up behind those they trusted—or from whom they hoped to gain some reassurance. Rum bottles changed hands, hands turned to knives.

The rudder stood still, the wheel unmoved, and yet it was the center that divided us. Every glance wandered there, every sentence led to it. Whoever got their hands on it owned the ship—and with it, us.

"We share it," one suggested, "a different one every day." But the laughter that followed was bitter. No one believed in shared power. Not at sea. Not in the hell we were already sailing into.

And so the helm stood empty, yet it was the most coveted seat. A seat for which men were willing to shed blood.

The captain was gone—and immediately we transformed. No longer a crew, no longer brothers. Just a pack, growling, snarling, preparing to tear.

The argument over the steering wheel was still flickering, when another fear arose, quieter but deeper. One of them murmured it first, with a dry throat:

“Maybe he’s not gone at all.”

The word settled over us like fog. No one laughed, no one contradicted. Instead, we looked around as if the planks themselves could have eyes.

"He hears us," whispered the Scotsman. "Every word. He's standing somewhere, invisible." "Nonsense," hissed Bark, but he spoke too quickly, and his hand trembled as it rested on the knife hilt.

From then on, every creak was suspicious. Every swinging lantern, every faint drop from the railing sounded like a footstep, like a breath. Some swore they smelled smoke, the familiar tobacco, even though there was no fire burning on deck. Others said they saw its shadow, briefly, flitting across the wheel.

The men became quieter, not calmer. Silent for fear that any word might betray him. Rum was drunk secretly, voices became whispers, whispers became silence. It was as if the ship itself had become an ear, and we hardly

spoke anymore, afraid the captain would hear everything—and judge in silence.

One dared to curse: "If he's here, let him show himself!" But the sea responded with a hard, dull thud against the hull, as if something had struck it. The men flinched, and the man shouting fell silent, paler than salt.

From then on, no one dared to challenge the old man. And no one knew what was worse: that he had disappeared—or that he had stayed.

It was as if someone had cut the rope that held us all together. Without the old man, the ship was no longer a ship—it was a cage. And we were the wolves in it.

The camps that had formed became harder. You could see it in their expressions: narrowed eyes, tense muscles, hands that had rested too long on knives. The air was no longer just stuffy with salt and sweat, but with threats, unspoken but sharper than any blade.

The Scotsman gathered a few around him, men with nimble fingers, whispering in the darkness. Bark kept the strong ones with him, rough fists that preferred striking to thinking. In between, the restless ones, who hopped back and forth like rats, here, there, always ready to switch sides.

Every step on deck sounded like a test. Who was avoiding whom, who was standing still, who was grinning too long? Even a cup of rum could spark if handed at the wrong moment.

A few prayed, quietly, furtively, as if they wanted to ally themselves with an invisible god long since swallowed by the sea. Others drank until they drowned their fear and stumbled laughingly between the camps until they bumped into the wrong man and the laughter stopped.

And over everything hung this silence that no one dared to break. Because we all knew: One wrong word, one wrong step, and it would all start again.

The sea remained calm, yes. The sky was clear. But on deck, in the belly of the ship, there was a storm. A storm of stares, resentment, and hunger. No captain, no law, just wolves waiting for the first order that no one wanted to give anymore.

And the ship creaked along, long and deep, as if it were pleased that we had become exactly what it had always wanted.

The day passed, but the old man didn't come. Not a footstep on deck, not a smoke from the cabin, not a shadow at the wheel. The sun set, the sky turned copper, and the wheel still stood empty, untouched, as if no one had ever laid a hand on it.

The men pretended to be working, but every eye was drawn there. The rudder drew us like a magnet, not because we wanted to operate it, but because it mocked us. A wheel without hands – and a ship that glided on nonetheless.

One murmured, "He'll be out soon." Another nodded, not believing it. We all stared at the cabin, the door black in the evening light, like a mouth ready to spit out something at any moment. But it remained silent.

The mood grew more tense as it grew darker. Some held their knives sharp, others whispered plans about who would claim the wheel tomorrow. But no one touched it. Not out of fear of each other, but out of fear of him. Perhaps he was just waiting for the one who dared to do it first.

Night fell, and the helm stood there, large and lonely. The space that had always been filled gaped like a wound in the heart of the ship. And the wound didn't bleed—it waited.

We sat in the dark, each of us on our own, our eyes on the cabin door, as if it might burst open at any moment. But it didn't. No captain stepped out.

And that was worse than any storm. Because a ship without a captain drifts. And drifting means we're no longer sailing—we're being carried. Where, only the sea knows.

Maps are lies, the sea is the truth

It was the morning after one of those nights in which no one had slept. The ship was drifting, the rudder empty, and the men had nothing left to hold on to—except paper.

So they took out the cards. One carried them under his arm as if they were treasures still worth something. He spread them out on the table in the flickering light of the lantern. Thin sheets of paper, covered with lines, circles, tiny numbers, and names that sounded as foreign as gods no one worships anymore.

We bent over it. Fingers, dirty and rough, stroked the ink as if they could conjure land. Here, the lines said, was the coast. There, the circles said, lay the islands. And there, in the middle of the blue, our ship should be—a small dot, a black cross, drawn by a hand.

But what was one hand against the sea?

The maps fluttered in the gentle breeze, their corners frayed, their ink smudged. Some lines were barely visible, others ran into nothing. And yet we stared at them like a mirror meant to tell us who we are and where we belong.

One tapped a spot with his finger. "Here we are," he said. Another shook his head. "Nonsense. There's just water here. I didn't see anything." "Then you were looking wrong." "Or the map is lying."

It began like a hiss, barely audible, but it grew: the mistrust. Maps were supposed to provide order, but they had the opposite effect. Every glance at them only made the sea appear larger, the destination more distant, the journey more pointless.

And I swear to you, comrade: As we sat bent over the leaves, I heard the sea creaking, deep and full, as if it were laughing. Laughing at our lines, our crosses, our pathetic attempts to press infinity into ink.

The cards were on the table. But the truth lay outside, black and endless.

The men stared at the leaves as if they could find comfort in them, but the longer they looked, the less true it was.

"The coast never looked like this," growled the Scotsman, poking a curved line with his finger. "There should be land here. I've only seen water for days." "Maybe you're blind," Bark snapped back. "The map doesn't lie." "Yes, it does," Toad interjected, his face glistening with grease, "it lies. It's changed. Yesterday, this island wasn't marked here."

The paper crackled in his hands. The men bent closer, swearing the lines had shifted, some thicker, some thinner. One claimed he'd never seen the name of a port before—and as he spoke, it almost seemed as if the writing had faded, as if it were about to disappear.

"Perhaps it was never a real map," murmured the Spaniard, "but just a picture to fool us." "Or it only shows what the sea wants," whispered another, and the silence following his words was heavy as lead.

For the sea beneath us contradicted every line. No horizon fit, no current, no star we could still interpret with certainty. It was as if the sea were laughing at the thin paper, as if it were blowing right in our faces:*You can't draw me. I won't let you hold me.*

Some began to crumple the paper, as if they could punish the sea. Others flattened it in panic, as if trying to preserve the order before it completely dissolved.

And I saw it myself, comrade: The lines had no truth. They were ink, nothing more. And ink fades.

But the sea remains.

We tried anyway. What choice did we have? One of us put his finger on the paper and drew a line across the blue. "This is how we'll go. Three days, then we'll make landfall." The helmsman nodded, secured the wheel, and we held our course.

But the sea laughed.

On the first day, we still believed we were on the right path. Stars above us, the compass shaky but faithful. But the next morning, everything looked the same: the same vastness, the same silence. No land, no sign, nothing.

On the second day, someone swore he'd seen a coast. A gray line on the horizon, solid, clear. We headed toward it, our hearts beating faster. But the closer we got, the more the line dissolved, until nothing remained but fog that settled over the water and disappeared again. The map showed land. The sea showed mockery.

On the third day, things got worse. The helmsman held the wheel, swearing we were keeping the course as marked. But the sea led us back. That evening, we saw a small island, a barren rock with a few seagulls on it. We marked it, glad to have a reference point. But the next morning, the same island was back on the starboard side—as if we'd been sailing in circles without realizing it.

The maps said: Forward. The sea said: Back.

One of them tore the paper from the table, crumpled it in his fist, and hurled it overboard. It drifted on the waves, shimmering white in the moonlight—and then disappeared as if the sea had greedily swallowed it.

"She eats the lies," murmured one, his voice barely audible. "And she eats us along with it."

From then on, we knew: every line on paper was just mockery. The sea itself paints our paths—and it doesn't use ink.

After the third failed voyage, the silence broke. The men were agitated, each searching for blame and direction simultaneously. The maps still lying on the table were crumpled, damp, and speckled with salt water. They already looked like trash, and yet some of the crew clung to them as if they were a sacred object.

"We must follow them," cried the Spaniard, tapping his finger on the lines. "Otherwise we'll wander forever! The maps are all we have left." "All we have left?" roared Borke. "The maps have betrayed us! We've been driving in circles like dogs for three days, and you call that a path?"

The shouting grew louder. Some swore by the maps, saying without them we'd be lost like blind men in a storm. Others shouted back that only the sea itself spoke the truth: stars, currents, the taste of the wind. "That's what carried us back then," growled the Scotsman, "not your damned paper."

Soon they stood facing each other, two camps, hands on knives, shoulders tense. Every sentence was a threat, every word a spark. One held up a card as if waving it like a flag. The other was already reaching for the lantern, as if he wanted to light it and burn it.

The rudder stood between them, empty, a wheel without hands. Everyone wanted it, no one was allowed. And above it all, the sea laughed, deep and quiet, with its steady lapping against the hull.

We were no longer sailing. We were wandering. Not because the sea cursed us—but because we were debating among ourselves whether we could trust it.

And so every direction became a weapon. By map, by star, by instinct—everything was a conflict, everything was a danger.

The sea watched. And it had time.

The argument continued until one of them suddenly raised his head and said quietly: “The old man… he never needed cards.”

Silence. For a moment, the voices fell silent, and we all knew he was right. The captain had never held a piece of paper in his hand. He stood at the helm, pipe in his mouth, eyes on the horizon, and the ship followed. No compass, no compass, no finger on a line. Just his gaze.

"He read the sea," murmured the Scotsman, "as if it were a book only he understood." "Or the sea read him," contradicted Toad with a hoarse laugh.

The memory made the maps even more pathetic. Thin, fluttering paper against a man whose silence was enough to guide us through fog, storm, and calm. No wonder they now looked like children's drawings.

One swore the captain had spoken to the sea itself. Not to stars or currents, but to the water, to the salt, to the wind. "He knew where to go because the sea told him." "Then it's also told him that we're nothing without him," growled another, and the sentence stuck like a curse.

The men stared at the maps again, but now they weren't just useless—they were a betrayal. They reminded us that we had never steered ourselves. That we had only followed.

And so his shadow hung over us, heavier than ever before. Not because he was there, but because he was missing.

The cards couldn't replace him. And we all knew that.

It began with a gust of wind, subtle, like a breeze over the sails. Then a second, stronger, sharper. The cards on the table fluttered as if frightened. One of them placed a hand on them, but the wind tore harder, lashing at the sails, making the wood creak like an animal waking up.

The sky darkened, clouds piled up like walls, and before we knew it, the storm was upon us. Rain lashed, the sea heaved, the ship creaked in every nail. The cards flew high, whirling through the air, thin sheets against an endless maw.

One jumped after her, grabbed a leaf, stumbled, and almost fell overboard. "Leave her!" yelled the Scotsman, but no one listened. Everyone tried to save at least a piece, as if their lives depended on it. But the sea wanted her. And the sea got her.

The gusts tore the leaves away, one by one, hurling them up, tearing them apart, throwing them into the water. We watched them drift, white, crumpled, soaked, until they sank, swallowed up as if they had never existed.

When the storm subsided, we lay panting on deck, the sails in tatters, the wood wet, the salt in our eyes. Not a single map remained.

Only the sea that surrounded us. Wide, deep, indifferent.

And then we knew: The sea had shown us the truth. No stroke, no line, no hand can force it. Whoever tries to paint it loses.

She laughed, yes. I heard it clearly in the lapping of the waves: a mocking laughter that told us what we should have known long ago.

The map is a lie. The sea is the truth.

When the storm finally subsided, nothing remained but debris—and emptiness. The sails flapped in tatters, the wood was soaked with rain, and we ourselves crouched on deck like beaten dogs. But worse: no paper left. No map. Not a line, not a cross, not a piece of ink that could tell us where we belonged.

The men stared out to sea, each in isolation. Not a word, not a curse, not even a cough. Only this silence, in which one could tell everyone was thinking the same thing:*Now we are completely in the hands of the sea.*

One muttered, "Maybe it's better this way." Another immediately punched him in the ribs, but not out of anger—more to cover his own trembling. Because the truth was: He was right.

We were naked. No lines, no security, no illusions. Only water, salt, wind.

The sea glittered in the morning light, smooth and calm, as if it had just taught us a lesson. And it was mercilessly clear: Everything we draw is a lie. Everything we believe is deception.

We had convinced ourselves that maps were power. But they were only crutches, and the sea had kicked them away, showing how weak we truly were.

From then on, no one dared to talk about maps. No one asked about courses or lines. We just stared out, eyes burning, hearts heavy, and knew: the ocean had stripped us to the bone.

And perhaps, comrade, that was the most honest thing he ever did.

Hands full of salt, hearts full of bile

The storm had chewed us through and spat us out again, leaving behind a ship with more holes than pride. The sails hung in tatters, the deck was wet and covered in broken glass, and the pumps groaned because the water in the belly wouldn't go away. So, work, endless, hard, sharp like salt on open meat.

The men pitched in, not out of duty, but because otherwise they would have drowned. With their bare hands, they pulled in ropes as rough as sandpaper. Every knot tore at their skin, every rope burned their palms. Soon, fingers were torn, nails splintered, and salt settled into the wounds, biting deep into the flesh until every grip was like fire.

No one complained loudly. But the growling, the panting, the silent gnashing of teeth—that was worse. We mended sails, we darned planks, we bailed water with buckets that became too heavy as soon as they were half full. Every drop was a burden, every movement a judgment.

The sun came out, mercilessly, and burned the salt even deeper into their skin. Soon, their shirts clung to their bodies, soaked with sweat, blood, and sea. Their hands swelled and turned red, yet they had to keep working. No doctor, no comfort, no end.

And the salt laughed. It didn't just scratch our skin—it crept deeper. Every grip on a rope was a vow that we were no longer human, but parts of the ship. Broken tools that were used nonetheless.

By evening, their hands were sore, swollen, and raw. Men held them carefully, as if carrying hot coals, but tomorrow they would grasp the same ropes again, strike the same planks, and reopen the same wounds.

The sea hadn't drowned us—it had turned us into beasts of burden. And the salt in our hands was proof of that.

The work never stopped, and sleep never came. When one closed one's eyes, there was the creaking of the pumps, the dripping of water in the ship's belly, the rubbing of the ropes like a whisper. Even in a half-sleep, there was no rest. Every dream was merely an extension of the torment: bailing water, mending sails, chopping wood. We woke up feeling like we had never slept.

The men's eyes turned red, their eyelids heavy, their bodies staggered. Some could barely stand, grasping at ropes just to keep from falling. But they had to

keep going. The ship demanded it. And the ship takes what it needs—whether we like it or not.

With the tiredness came anger. At first, it was small, in quiet barbs. "You're working too slowly." - "Shut up, I work harder than you." But every word was a spark. One man was throwing a bucket at another's feet, and a fist was slamming against a shoulder.

Rum didn't help. Rum made it worse. One of them poured the rest of a bottle down his throat to force sleep, but sleep didn't come. Instead, the curses came, louder, harsher. Soon there was no more singing, no more laughter, no more stories of old trips. Only growling. Only teeth.

And so we hung together on that swaying coffin, each of us tired to the bone, each of us filled with rage that found no outlet. We were like dogs on the same chain, biting each other's necks because otherwise they'd go mad.

Fatigue gnawed at us, anger boiled, and the sea watched. Calm, quiet, broad. It knew: We were doing the work for it.

There's nothing more cruel than salt on open skin. Not the blade, not the fist, not even hunger. Salt is more patient. It settles, day after day, drop by drop, until the wound no longer dares to heal.

Our hands were no longer hands. They were swollen lumps, red, cracked, covered in small cuts. Every grip on the rope cut deeper into the fibers, every strike against the plank burned like fire. And the sea, which constantly washed over us, didn't wash away suffering—it kept it alive.

Some wrapped their fingers in rags, but they only got wet, stuck to the wounds, and made it worse. Others just let it go, gritting their teeth as salt crusts dried on their palms. Every handshake, every grasp of a tool, felt like grasping thorns.

The salt didn't stop at our hands. It crept into our skin, settling into every scrape, every bruised knee, every cracked lip. We tasted it when we breathed, we smelled it when we were close to one another. A stench of the sea, but not fresh—rotten, old, like barrels left in the sun too long.

It turned us into walking barrels filled with salt and bile. Our eyes burned, our mouths were dry, and even the water we drank tasted of metal and salt. Not a drop was pure. Everything was permeated by the same taste: bitter, sharp, endless.

Sometimes men rubbed their wounds as if they could squeeze the salt out. But it just laughed, settling in more firmly. Salt doesn't heal anything. It preserves. It keeps the rot alive.

And so we ourselves became half-fish—skin softened, hearts laced with bitterness. We had long since ceased to be human. Merely flesh, slowly marinated in brine.

It wasn't just the salt that was eating us away. It was what it left behind within us: bitterness. Our hands could barely grip, our skin was sore, but worse were the looks. They became sharper, more venomous, as if each of us was seeking an alibi for our own pain in the other's eyes.

Food? Barely enough. A piece of bread was treated as if it were gold. Every bite, every drop of water was accompanied by a look: suspicious, hard, hostile. "You've taken more." - "Don't lie." - "Show your purse." Words like knives, flat, but sharp enough to draw blood.

No one trusted each other anymore. We had ceased to be brothers. We were prisoners, spying on each other. Even while sleeping, men clutched their blankets, as if they could still salvage something inside. Some held their knives openly in their hands, as a pillow.

Talk of camaraderie had long since died. Those who helped someone did so not out of kindness, but out of calculation: "If I take his bucket, he owes me." Every gesture was a bargain, no longer a human one.

Some whispered that someone was stealing in the night. Others swore they'd seen someone not sharing their water. Whether it was true or not, it didn't matter. The thought was enough. The poison was already within us.

It was as if we had salt in our hearts instead of blood. Bitter, sharp, burning. Every beat pumped more distrust through our veins, until nothing good remained.

We no longer saw each other as men, but as obstacles. Obstacles on a ship that was sinking anyway. And the sea? It remained silent. It let us do what we wanted. Because it knew we would consume ourselves before the waves could claim us.

It started with little things. It always starts with little things.

A cup of water that stayed in one person's hand too long. A piece of bread that looked too big in another person's mouth. A spot in the hammock that one person claimed, even though it had never been "their" spot.

The words were short, sharp, like sparks in straw. And then the fists flew.

No one struck to win. They struck to feel. To drive all the salt that burned in the wounds from the bones. The Scotsman threw the Spaniard against a plank, the Spaniard spat blood and laughed until he fell back with a knife in his hand.

Rum made it worse. It circulated like poison, in small sips, secretly exchanged, secretly stolen. Those who drank it became louder, more brutal, one more spark in a barrel that had long been overflowing. Laughter sounded like barking, screaming like howling.

Some fights ended quickly—a bloody face, a bruised arm, then silence. Others lasted until the deck ran red, until men collapsed, breathless, cursing because they no longer had the strength to strike.

But no matter how it ended, each of these outbursts left something behind. A distrust that ran deeper. A look that was no longer brother, but wolf.

And every time blood dripped onto the planks, the salt burned. It didn't sizzle, but we felt it. As if the sea were happy to absorb another piece of us.

The ship was no longer a ship. It was an arena. And we weren't fighting storms or sharks—we were fighting ourselves.

Amidst all the arguments, the captain's cabin remained silent. The door closed, not a footstep, not a smoke, not a sound. Only this silence, which weighed more heavily than any whip.

The men whispered. First quietly, then louder, like rats noticing that the cat is no longer looking through the hole.

"He's doing it on purpose," muttered the Scotsman. "He wants to see us fall apart." "Break us, one by one," snarled the Spaniard. "Until only the tough ones remain."
"Or he's long gone," growled Borke, "and we're performing here for an audience that no longer exists."

But no one believed the other. Every sentence only brought new doubts, new anger. Some swore they'd heard footsteps in the night, right behind the cabin

door. Others said they'd smelled smoke, as if the pipe had been lit again. One even said he'd heard the captain say in a dream: "Carry on. I can see you."

We didn't know if we were being overheard or if it was just our own madness speaking. But one thing was certain: his silence held us more firmly in its grip than any command.

Every blow, every argument, every knife that was drawn – there was always the question:*Does he see this? Does he want this? Has he long since turned us into toys?*

And the silence never answered. It made us boil, sweat, and eat away at us. Exactly what salt does when it seeps into flesh: It keeps everything alive, longer, more bitterly, harder.

The captain didn't speak. But he was there. Maybe in the cabin. Maybe in the wood. Maybe in us.

And the silence was the hardest whip of all.

At the end of the day, we stood there like stranded people, even though the sea was still carrying us. Our hands were sore, swollen, full of cracks, salt crusted over every wound. It was as if we had rubbed the sea itself into our skin, and it wouldn't let go.

But worse were the hearts. Heavy, black, bitter. Every beat in them wasn't hope, but bile flowing through the veins. We hardly spoke anymore, and when we did, it was only to cut each other. No word without poison, no look without mistrust.

We had ceased to be a team. Brothers? Long forgotten. We were mere shadows of men, squatting in the same cage. Each waiting for the other to stumble, fall, weaken—so they could breathe one more day.

The salt had corroded our bodies, the bile our souls. And between us lay nothing but a silence sharper than any knife.

Above hung the sky, vast, empty, indifferent. Below, the sea creaked, patient, hungry. We were no longer sailors. We were prey, tearing ourselves to pieces before the hunter came.

And so the day ended: with hands full of salt, hearts full of bile. No song, no prayer, no consolation. Only the certainty that the next person to fall won't be taken by the sea—but by us.

The girl with the torn dress

Morning broke quietly. No wind, not a seagull's cry, only a gray light creeping across the sea, as if it didn't want to dispel the darkness, but only thin it. The ship drifted, as tired as we were, and the men stood disheveled at the railing, each with salt in their hands, bile in their hearts.

Then someone saw something. At first, just a speck in the leaden water. He rubbed his eyes, blinked, and nudged the man next to him. "There... do you see it?"

We stared out. A piece of flotsam, perhaps, we thought. A plank, a barrel, the remains of a ship that the sea had already consumed. But it was moving. Not like wood in a current, but like something that still carried life within it.

As we got closer, we recognized it: a small, thin figure clinging to a piece of wreckage. Black hair clung wetly to its face, a torn dress fluttering weakly in the wind, as if it itself were still calling for help.

"A girl," one breathed in disbelief. "Out here in the middle..."

The men crowded around the railing, eyes wide, mouths open. Some cursed, others laughed nervously, as if it were a bad joke. But the shadow remained, the figure remained, and the sea slowly pushed it closer, as if it were bringing it to us.

We threw ropes, one even jumped into the water, grabbed her, and pulled her aboard. She was heavy, despite her delicate size, heavy like wood that had lain in the water too long. Her lips were blue, her eyes half-closed, but she was alive. Her breathing was shallow, but it was there.

We laid her on the deck, dripping, trembling. And her dress, torn, hung on her like the last shred of something that must once have been beautiful.

The sea was silent, as if it had given us an answer we hadn't asked for.

And we stood around, our hands full of salt, our hearts full of gall—and didn't know whether what we had pulled out of the water was salvation or a curse.

We gathered around her like hungry dogs around a piece of meat no one dared to touch. She lay there, motionless, her skin pale as the morning light, her lips bluish, her dress torn to the threads. Water dripped from her hair, running down the deck, mingling with the salt already clinging there.

"She's breathing," murmured one, kneeling down and placing his hand on her neck. "Shallow, but she's breathing." "Then she's a miracle," whispered the young bird, with eyes as big as sails. "A miracle?" Bark laughed harshly, bitterly. "The sea doesn't give miracles. When it gives you something, it wants twice as much back."

The voices were overwhelming. Some wanted to carry her into the cabin immediately, warm her, feed her, and save her. Others said we should throw her back into the water right away before misfortune carried her into the ship.

"A girl out here?" growled the Scotsman. "This isn't a refuge. This is a sign." "A sign of what?" asked one. "For what's coming," was the reply—and it made the air heavier than any storm.

We finally lifted her up, two men by her arms, one by her legs. She was lighter than one would have thought, almost as if she were made only of clothing, bones, and water. She mumbled something unintelligible, perhaps a name, perhaps just the sea speaking through her teeth.

We carried them down into the twilight of the ship's belly. Some crossed their arms, others laughed nervously, still others just stared, as if they'd seen something they'd rather never have.

The water remained on deck where she had lain. A puddle that slowly seeped into the cracks. Some swore the water was darker than the sea itself.

And so she came aboard. Not by invitation, not by choice—the sea had given her to us. And no man knew whether we would have done better to refuse the gift.

We laid her in the belly of the ship, where it was darker than on deck, where only a dim lantern swayed. She lay on old blankets that had long since begun to smell of sweat and tar, yet she seemed barely aware of what was around her. Her eyelids fluttered, her lips murmured, but no clear words emerged.

Someone handed her water. She drank slowly, in small sips, as if she had to remember how to do it. A few bites of bread followed, and we stared at her as if every sip were a decision about our own fate.

She didn't speak. Not really. Only sometimes, when the ship creaked, when the planks sang, she raised her head, as if listening to something only she could hear. Her eyes—large, dark, deep—flickered over us without really seeing us. It was as if she were looking through us, out into the sea, into a distance we didn't know.

The men grew uneasy. Some saw in her a sign of salvation. "The sea is giving us back what it has taken," said Vogel, almost reverently. Others whispered that she was a bird of ill-luck, a harbinger of things to come. "No girl floats out here alone," growled the Scotsman. "The sea doesn't spit out anything unless it wants to hit you."

She remained silent, yet her silence seemed louder than any words. Even Toad, who usually filled every hole with chatter, fell silent when he sat next to her.

And as the ship drifted on, something changed in the air. It wasn't just salt and bile anymore. There was a different smell, a different weight. A feeling that she wasn't just a person we had saved—but something that had tested us.

She didn't speak. She didn't need to. Her eyes said enough:*I know more than you want to know.*

No one could ignore her. She lay in the belly of the ship, silent, with disheveled hair and a dress that was more rags than fabric—and yet she was on everyone's minds.

The men talked. First secretly, then openly, each with his own truth.

"She's a survivor," said Vogel, a gleam in his eyes. "The sea gave her back to us. She is hope." "Hope?" snarled the Scotsman. "The sea doesn't spit out hope. It spit out curses. She's a bird of misfortune." "Nonsense," interjected Toad, "she's a witch. She has eyes that see everything. Haven't you noticed? When she looks at you, she knows what you're thinking."

Soon, the stories grew like mold in damp wood. Some swore they heard her talking in her sleep, in languages no one knew. Others claimed she glowed in the dark, just for a breath, but enough to bring sweat to their brows.

The ship split into camps again. Some wanted to protect her, as if she were a treasure entrusted to us by the sea. They gave her water, bread, and spoke softly to her, as if she could save them. Others wanted to be rid of her. "Overboard with her before she curses us all," they cried, their voices harsh, full of fear, sounding like courage.

And in between them were the greedy ones who looked at her like a piece of meat craved by hunger. Their gazes were no longer brotherly, but the panting of dogs, still holding back but already drooling.

Thus, she became more than just a girl with a tattered dress. She became a mirror for everything we've long carried within us: hope, fear, greed.

And everyone knew: Soon, someone would reach out for her. Not out of kindness, but out of hunger.

She remained silent for a long time, almost for days. She sat in the twilight, drank water, and tore the bread apart with trembling fingers, without a single word. But then it came, so casually that our skin ran cold.

Toad had just begun his endless rant about hunger, thirst, and the sea that hates us. He pounded his fist against the plank, roaring, "One more day like this, and I'll jump myself!" Then she raised her head, looked at him with eyes as black as pitch—and whispered:

"You won't jump, toad. You'll die on a rope."

Silence. Ice cold. No one had said his name, no one had told it to her. But she spoke it, quietly, confidently, without hesitation. Toad froze as if she had cut him with a knife.

A murmur went through the men. "She knows... she knows!" Vogel backed away as if she'd breathed fire. Bark growled, "A trick. Someone told her." But we all knew no one could.

Later, she spoke again, even more quietly. She looked at the deck as if she could see through it. "The wood cracks because it's carrying too much weight. It wants blood to lighten."

The men held their breath. She spoke of things no one could know, not them, not us. It wasn't knowledge; it was as if she was hearing voices we weren't allowed to hear.

From then on, she fell silent again, but it was too late. The seed had been sown. Every glance she cast, every twitch of her lips was an oracle. When she turned her head, people shrank back, afraid she might reveal another secret.

And in every heart lay the question: How did she know this? Had she learned it in the water? Had the captain whispered it in her ear? Or was the sea itself speaking through her?

She was no longer a girl. She was a mystery. And mysteries drive men crazy.

After her words, no one was the same anymore. Some kept their distance, as if she were made of poison. Others stared at her as if they could read the end of their journey from her gaze. But worst of all were the whispers that spread—not about her, but about him.

"Perhaps the captain sent her," one whispered. "He himself raised her from the sea, to test us," murmured the Scotsman. "Or she's his pawn," hissed Toad, still pale from her prophecy. "His price for us. We pay it, not he."

The men remembered his scar, the silence, the whistle that never went out. And now this girl lay there, little more than skin and bones, knowing things she couldn't possibly know. For many, the calculation was simple: She belonged to him. Whether as a messenger, as a tool, or as proof that he still had us under his control—it made no difference.

She remained silent when we asked her. No "yes," no "no." Just this blink, slow, confident, as if she knew more than we could bear. And sometimes, when the ship creaked, she raised her head, as if listening to a voice we weren't allowed to hear.

That made it worse. Because the less she said, the more we filled in the gaps ourselves. Every sentence about her was also a sentence about him. And the more we talked, the more we felt that he was never gone.

Thus she became the captain's shadow. A silent omen sitting among us, with eyes that pierced us and a dress that fluttered in the wind like a warning.

And no matter what she was, she didn't belong to us. She belonged to him.

Evening came, heavy and red, the sea shone copper, and the ship groaned as if it were carrying more than just us. She sat at the bow, silent, her knees drawn to her chest. No one had asked her to go there. She had simply walked, barefoot, as if the deck belonged to her.

Her dress, torn, hung in tatters on her bones, fluttering in the wind. Not strong, not proud, more like an old sail that has lost its color but still has the strength to change course. We watched her, and it was as if it wasn't fabric fluttering—but a sign.

Some murmured that it was an omen. Others remained silent, their eyes fixed on the dress, as if they could read it like a map that knew more than ours ever could. No one dared to touch it, no one dared to turn their back on it.

The wind played with the dress, making it flap, sometimes like a flag, sometimes like a shroud. And we all felt it: She was no longer just a girl. She was a promise. Or a threat.

The Scotsman spat into the sea, quietly, almost reverently. "This is no coincidence," he murmured. "The sea doesn't throw anything on board that doesn't have to be there."
And Vogel, the boy, just whispered: "Maybe it will lead us. Maybe away. Maybe deeper."

But no one believed in rescue. Not really. We knew her dress wasn't fluttering for us—it was fluttering for the sea.

And so the day ended: with a scrap of fabric blowing in the wind that spoke more than a thousand words. And with men who realized she was no longer human.

She was an omen. And we were her ship.

Once again land under the boots

It was one of those mornings that began gray, yet seemed brighter because we had long since become accustomed to the darkness. The sea lay calm, the sky pale, and the ship drifted as if it no longer had any direction. The men dragged themselves across the deck, tired, sore, each with salt in their hands and bitterness in their stomachs.

Then a scream erupted from above.

"Country!"

He ripped us open like a blow. Heads shot up, eyes widened, mouths opened. For a heartbeat, no one believed what they had heard. Then he called again, louder, more firmly, from the crow's nest:

"Land! I see land!"

The word alone was enough. It was like fire in a powder keg. Men ran to the railing, pushing each other, craning their necks as if they could force the horizon. And there it was – a line, barely visible, where sky and water kissed. A dark shadow, thin as smoke, but solid enough that it couldn't be blinked away.

A roaring sound swept across the deck, not wind, not creaking sails—it was the roar of voices, all whispering the same thing at once: "Land." Some laughed, hoarsely, madly, as if they had forgotten the word and just invented it anew. Others wept, their hands over their faces, as if the sight were too much.

Some knelt down, kissing the wet wood as if they already had dirt under their lips. Others spat overboard, grinned, and shouted curses into the wind so wildly that they almost sounded like prayers of thanks.

And yet, deep in our stomachs, a sting remained. For the sea had betrayed us many times before. Shadows, mists, islands that crumbled into nothing. But this time… this time it was bigger. Darker. Solider.

“Land,” murmured one, “some more land under our boots.”

And in that sentence lay everything: hope, fear, and the certainty that if it wasn't a dream, the country would either save us or swallow us whole.

As soon as the word "land" left our lips, another fever broke out. It wasn't the view of the coast that gripped us—it was what it triggered in our minds.

"Earth," murmured Vogel, the boy, with glazed eyes. "Solid ground. Not this damned swaying." He knelt down and slapped his hands on the deck, as if he could already feel the sand beneath.

Toad started talking, loudly, much too loudly: about taverns, about beer pouring cold from kegs, about tables that don't tip over. His voice trembled, but the twitch in his lips was real—he could almost taste it.

Others spoke of women. Of hair that didn't smell of salt, of skin that wasn't torn by the wind, of voices that didn't curse but laughed. They laughed along, dirty and greedily, but it was a laugh that sounded like liberation.

Some murmured of the earth itself—the smell of damp soil after rain, of grass tickling bare feet. A few remembered forests, the cracking of twigs, the echo of voices among the trees. Things that had long since become as distant to us as a fairy tale.

The salt in our hands burned harder just because we imagined what it would be like to rub them in dirt, in mud, in dust, in anything that wasn't the sea.

One swore that as soon as he had solid ground beneath his boots, he would throw himself down and not get up, no matter who kicked him. Another whispered, "I just want to wash away the stench of tar and seaweed and smell the earth on my breath for once."

The conversations became louder, more urgent, more feverish. And the more they talked, the more the longing ate into us.

We were still sailing, yes. But in our minds, we were already there. Already on land. Already in another world.

And that was the greatest danger. Because the sea listens when you forget it.

We held our course as if the ship itself had awakened. Every movement, which had just been tired, became faster, harder, more greedily. Ropes were pulled, sails were set, oars were thrust into the water—all with one sole goal: to make the black line on the horizon grow larger.

And it grew. Hour by hour. The thin shadow became an edge, the edge a ridge, the ridge an entire coastline. First just gray, then green, then brown. Trees stretched, fine lines against the sky, a hill stretched out, and at its base lay something that looked like a beach—bright, almost golden.

"Land," murmured the Scotsman, this time not doubtful, but hungry. His eyes glittered as if he already had both feet deep in the sand. Vogel wept openly, tears streaming down his salty face, and no one laughed at him.

But the closer we got, the more the sea changed. It became choppy, not like a storm, but like an animal that doesn't want anyone entering its burrow. Small waves crashed against the hull, harder, more frequently. A creaking sound ran through the ship, deep and dull, as if it wanted to warn us.

"It doesn't like it," someone murmured, and everyone knew what he meant. The sea didn't like that we wanted to turn our backs on it. It pushed against us, pulled, tried to hold us back.

But we pressed on, staring straight ahead at the land, which was becoming clearer and clearer. We could already see the shimmer of the beach, the darkness of the forests, the hills that seemed like the backs of sleeping giants.

Just one more step. Just one more step, we told ourselves, and then we'd have solid ground beneath our boots.

But in every thump of the waves, I heard it: a rumble. Not a storm, not thunder—but a growl. The sea growled at us.

We dropped the anchor, and it rattled into the water like a scream. The ship groaned, settled, and the men held their breath. Before us lay the coast. Tangible, real, close.

Boats were made ready. Hands trembled on the oars, not with fear, but with greed. Everyone wanted to be the first to touch bottom, the first to stop swaying. We climbed aboard, stomped into the creaking wood, and the boats began to move.

The sea pushed us, slowly, reluctantly. Every stroke of the oar was heavy, the water pressing against us as if trying to pull us back. But we came closer, meter by meter. The beach grew, the sand shone, and soon we could even smell it—not the salt, not the tarry smell of the ship, but something else. Dry, alien, like dust.

Then the first boat touched bottom. A dull thud, a jolt. Men jumped out, stumbled, stumbled some more, until they were knee-deep in water. And then – sand.

Feet sank in, heavy, soft, warm. Some immediately knelt down, threw themselves face down into the ground, kissing the sand as if it were an altar. Others laughed, wildly, shrilly, like dogs finally released from their cages. Still others just stood there, staring at the beach, as if they'd forgotten what earth looked like.

One grabbed a handful of sand, let it run through his fingers, laughing and crying at the same time. "Land," he stammered, "real land."

But despite the joy, something heavy hung in the air. The land was silent. Too silent. No seagulls, no screams, no rustling. Just sand, trees, hills – motionless, as if waiting.

We had arrived. Once again, land beneath our boots. But no one knew whether we were guests here. Or victims.

We stood in the sand, barefoot or in boots, expecting the sounds one hears on land: birdsong, insects, rustling in the grass. But there was nothing. Only our own panting, our laughter, our cursing—and then silence again.

The trees stood there as if painted. Not a leaf moved, even though a wind blew off the sea. Dark trunks, tightly packed, a wall of green and brown that stared at us without letting us in. Behind them, a hill, bare, hard, like a hump, dividing the world.

We ventured a little further. The sand was soft, almost too soft, like powder. Some knelt, dug their hands into it, letting it trickle through their fingers, as if they could test its authenticity. Others treaded suspiciously, cautious with each step, as if afraid the ground might give way.

"Where are the birds?" someone asked, too loudly. No one answered. "No tracks," murmured the Scotsman, who had sunk to his knees. "No foot, no claw, not even a beetle."

The water that had accompanied us this far gently splashed onto the beach, but that too sounded strange—duller, heavier, as if the sand wasn't ready to absorb it.

The longer we stood there, the clearer it became: this wasn't a land that welcomed us. It was a land that tested us. It lay there, silent, unmoving, and made us sweat, not knowing whether it was carrying us or swallowing us.

A few men laughed, laughed too loudly, as if they wanted to break the silence. But the silence didn't break. It settled over us like a blanket, thick and oppressive.

And in this silence, every breath was a theft.

We ventured away from the beach, step by step, into the greenery, our hearts heavier than any duffel bag. The trees stood thick, their shadows intertwined, and the further we walked, the more we felt that this was no ordinary land.

The ground was soft, too soft. Boots sank into the ground, as if we weren't standing on earth, but on something that only pretended to be earth. Some claimed they felt a pulse in the ground, a beating, deep and slow, as if the land itself had a heart.

Then we found tracks. Not of animals, not of humans—something else. Deep impressions, misshapen, too large, too sharp. One swore he saw claws. Another said they were grooves, as if something crawling had pulled itself through them. Nothing fit. And that made it worse.

Thirst drove us on. We found a spring, water seeping clear from the stones. Men bent down, drank greedily—and immediately spat it back out. Bitter. Metallic. Like blood that had been standing for a long time.

“This isn’t water,” one gasped, wiping his mouth, “this is an illusion.”

The men grew nervous. Hands reached for knives, as if blades could help against the silence. One laughed, harshly, madly: "Maybe we're already dead and just don't realize it." But no one laughed along.

The land remained silent. No bird, no animal, no sound except ourselves. But we sensed it—we weren't alone. There was something in the thicket, invisible, waiting. Perhaps that which had left the tracks. Perhaps the land itself.

We had land beneath our boots, yes. But it felt like we'd just put our foot in a mouth.

At the end of the day, we lay on the sand, more exhausted than ever. Some had taken off their boots, digging their toes deep into the ground as if they needed to cling on to prevent the sea from reclaiming them. Others toppled over like drunks, laughing, crying, rolling around in the sand like children running free for the first time.

For a moment, it seemed like consolation. We had earth beneath us, not water. We had sand in our hair, not salt. Some men fell asleep immediately, their mouths open, as if they had reached their destination.

But the consolation was false.

For the land remained silent. No sound, no rustling, no life to welcome us. And the wind that blew across the beach brought no warmth, no songs, but something else: voices.

At first, we thought it was just our imagination, the sound of the sea following us. But the longer we listened, the clearer it became. Whispers. Words almost understandable, but never fully. Some sounded familiar, like the voices of men who had long since fallen asleep at sea. Others were strange, hoarse, like the rumble of stones in the water.

A few men covered their ears, others stared out at the sea, which lay like an open wound in the twilight. And then we knew: The voices weren't coming from land. They were coming from where we had fled: from the sea.

The land carried us, yes. But it only carried us as long as the sea wanted. We lay on the sand, tired, exhausted, and heard the sea laughing. A laughter that promised us:

You won't escape me. You belong to me. Land or no land, I'll get you.

And so the country was no consolation. It was just a new stage.

The bet with the Klabautermann

The night was quiet, too quiet. No wind, no waves, only the dull beating of our hearts and the creaking of the planks. Calm. A sea as smooth as oil, and the ship lay there like a beached whale, only without a beach.

The men lay scattered across the deck, dull, silent, each staring into the void. A few clutched their rum cups as if they could drown their boredom. But the rum, too, wasn't flowing as usual. It had gone flat, heavy as lead.

Then it came. Quietly at first. A sound no one could quite identify. A gurgling sound. Not like water lapping against the hull. Different. Deeper. Like a throat that had drunk too much.

"Did you hear that?" someone asked, but no one answered. Then again—*glug-glug-glug*– followed by a laugh. Muffled, dirty, brief, but so loud that it cut through the silence like a knife.

The men jumped. Their eyes darted around, everyone searching for the culprit. No one had done it. But the sound came again, this time clearer, directly from the belly of the ship, between the barrels.

We stared at the hatch that led into the storeroom. A giggle, then a loud*Pop*As if a cork had been pulled. And then – the smacking, gurgling, smacking of someone who was drinking like a pig.

"The barrels," murmured the Scotsman, pale. "Someone's drinking..."

We walked down cautiously, as if we were children discovering something forbidden. The smell of rum hung heavy in the air, much stronger than usual, sweet and pungent. One barrel was dripping. Another was already half empty, although it had been full yesterday.

And there—between the barrels—we saw a shadow scurrying by. Small, crooked, with a nose as red as a glowing coal. And again that laughter, gurgling, throaty, as if coming from the wood itself.

“By all the devils,” one breathed, “that’s the Klabautermann…”

And once that was said, we knew: we had company. And she was thirstier than all of us combined.

He didn't come with thunder, with smoke, or with any kind of ghost. He was simply there. Between the barrels, as if he'd always been there, just too lazy to show himself.

A small fellow, barely tall enough to a sailor's chest, but broader than many of us. His skin was as gray as wet wood, his eyes sparkling like wet coals, and his nose was red, gnarled, and shiny, as if he'd been soaking it in rum for centuries.

He grinned, revealing a row of teeth, crooked and brown, but strong enough to gnaw open a barrel. In his hand, he held no cup, no bowl—he held the entire barrel, tipped it, and drank as if he were thirst itself. Rum ran down his chin, dripped into his beard, and splashed onto the floor. And he laughed as he did so, a chuckle, a snort, a cough that froze every one of us.

"What are you staring at?" he finally croaked, his voice scratchy but loud enough to fill the entire ship. "Have you never seen a fellow thirsty?"

No one answered. We stood there like wet dogs, and he just grinned wider. He tapped the half-empty barrel and shouted, "Your rum tastes awful—but better than water! So, one more!"

He staggered, staggered, but every step was sure, as if the ship belonged to him. With one hand, he ripped the cork from a second barrel; the wood splintered, rum splashed—and he lowered his head into the stream, drinking until he gasped for air. Then he laughed, laughed so loudly that the planks shook.

"In all storms," one of us muttered, "he drinks like ten men." "Like a hundred," he corrected himself, puffing, his beard dripping. "And I won't stop until you join in!"

We knew: This wasn't a ghost that could be banished. This was the Klabautermann. And he hadn't come to scare us. He had come to drink us under the table.

He squatted between the barrels with his legs wide apart, belched, wiped his beard with a sleeve that smelled of seaweed, and grinned at us.

"You're staring like chicks in a storm," he said, his voice croaky yet strangely warm. "So listen up, you half-men: I'll make you a bet."

The men approached, uncertain, but the smell of rum drew them like flies to carrion.

"A bet?" asked Borke cautiously, his hands already on his belt. "Aye," cried the Klabautermann, slamming his fist on the barrel so loudly that it boomed. "A bet about what you love most. Your barrels, your throats—and your miserable souls. I'll drink you all under the table. And whoever doesn't keep up is mine."

A silence fell over the group. Vogel shook his head, pale as chalk. "A soul has no price." The little boy laughed so loudly that the lantern shook. "No soul has a price? Every one of you has long since sold it for less! For a cup, for a woman, for a pile of coins that will fly into the water in the next storm. So spare me the babble. Drink—or forever be silent."

He set out a wooden cup, old and cracked. He filled it to the brim. "Whoever opposes me raises their hand. One by one. Until no one is left standing."

The men looked at each other. Fear, greed, defiance—everything was evident in their faces. The first to kick was the Scotsman. He snatched the cup and growled: "If I'm going to die, I'll die with rum in my stomach."

The Klabautermann grinned and slammed his fist on the table. "That's the way you talk! Now show me if you're more than salt and scars."

And so the bet began.

The Scotsman raised the cup, threw it back, and the rum ran down his throat like fire. He gasped, shuddered, slammed his fist on the table—and grinned, broadly and defiantly. "More!"

The Klabautermann laughed and downed the same cup twice as fast without batting an eyelid. "Just warming up, nothing more," he roared, and the men cheered.

Then Borke stepped forward. His hands didn't shake, he threw the cup down his throat like a pitcher of water. Sweat beaded on his brow, he huffed, cursed—and held his ground. But the little fellow took the whole barrel, lifted it up, drank, drank, drank, until drops ran down his beard and he threw it back with a belch, half empty. "Your rum is thin," he laughed. "Give me more of your life."

Then came Toad, then the Spaniard, then one after the other. Some held on, staggering, laughing, roaring, clinking glasses like in a tavern. Others toppled over, stumbling after just the second, falling to the deck, gasping, while the hobgoblin continued to drink as if drinking only made him stronger.

His laughter grew. With each cup, it grew deeper, echoing louder through the belly of the ship, as if the wood itself were laughing along. He sang, roared, and tapped the barrels in time until the planks shook. The ship seemed to rock along, as if it were drunk itself.

Soon we were more staggering shadows than men. Words blurred, songs stumbled, some spoke in tongues no one understood. But the Klabautermann remained lucid. Drunk, yes, but invincible. Every sip seemed to give him strength, as if he were sucking us dry.

"Not yet! Not yet!" he roared, his eyes glowing, "until no one is left standing!"

And we knew: This was no longer a bet. It was a meal. And we were the meal.

The rum flowed, the cups tipped, and at some point it was no longer just a drinking game. The intoxication was too strong, too deep, too sharp. Tongues stumbled, legs wobbled, and yet... we heard things none of us should hear.

At first it was just a murmur, quiet, barely more than the gurgling in the barrel. But then there were voices. Clear. Familiar voices. One heard his mother calling, another the officer who had once whipped him. I myself heard a laugh that had long since sunk into the sea—the laughter of a comrade I had seen fall overboard years ago.

The faces were added. In the rum itself. Each cup wasn't just brown slop; it was a mirror, a window. Men stared into it and saw things that shouldn't have been there: dead friends, drowned brothers, a child waving from the shore. One screamed, threw the cup away, but the Klabautermann just laughed, loudly, deeply, as if he himself had poured the faces into it.

"It tastes better this way, doesn't it?" he roared, raising his cup and draining it in one gulp. "Rum with memories, rum with sin! Better than plain water, huh?"

Some laughed along, hoarsely, madly; others staggered back, covering their eyes as if they could erase the images. But the voices remained, even without the cup. They echoed in people's heads, speaking secrets no one wanted to hear.

"You already belong to me," whispered in one's ear, and he sank to his knees. "Jump," whispered another, and he staggered toward the railing until we pulled him back.

But the Klabautermann kept drinking, and with every sip we grew emptier. Not just the barrels—we ourselves. It was as if he wasn't drinking the rum, but us.

And in our excitement we realized: This bet had long been decided.

He put the cup down, slowly, so quietly that the wood barely cracked. His eyes glowed red in the lantern light, and the laughter was gone. Instead, he spoke clearly, so clearly that we shivered despite his intoxication.

"Now listen up, you scoundrels," he growled, his voice like the creaking of planks in a storm. "Every cup wasn't just rum. Every cup was a stake."

The men stared at him, staggering, panting. One wiped his mouth, another held his stomach as if he were holding back the rum.

"Whoever loses," the Klabautermann continued, "stays here. Not just today, not just tomorrow. Forever. You will become part of the ship, shadows between the planks, whispers in the sails. You will whistle in the wind, creak in the wood, drip in the barrel. Invisible, unheard—except by me. I hear you all."

He grinned again, broadly, cruelly. "That's the price. And believe me—most of you have already paid it without even realizing it."

As soon as he said it, one of them toppled over. Toad. He hit the deck hard, his face red, his eyes glassy, his tongue heavy. A groan, then silence. He was breathing, yes—but he was gone, somewhere else.

"First," roared the Klabautermann, raising his arms as if he had won a victory. "First is mine!"

Panic spread. Some wanted to jump up, to flee, but where to? We were in the belly of the ship, and he blocked the hatch like a sentry. Others grabbed cups, out of defiance, out of fear, out of madness – as if they could defeat him if they just tipped enough.

But we'd known for a long time: There was no winning. The bet was a trap. Every sip brought us closer to disappearance.

And the Klabautermann laughed again. Deeply, heartily, as if he weren't drinking the rum—but us.

Morning crept slowly over the planks, pale and cold. The ship smelled of spilled rum, sweat, and fear. Men lay scattered everywhere, semi-conscious, some gasping, others motionless, as if they hadn't survived the night.

The barrels were empty. Down to the last drop. The rum that should have sustained us for weeks was gone, as if the sea itself had sucked it dry.

And the Klabautermann? Gone. No trace of him. No shadow among the barrels, no gurgling in the darkness. As if he had never been there.

But that wasn't true. Because he was still there. Not visible, not tangible – but audible.

At first quiet, barely more than an echo. Then clearer, deeper, broader. The laughter. That gurgling, that coughing, that snorting that vibrated through the planks. It was everywhere: in the creaking of the mast, the lapping of the waves, the rattling of the ropes.

We stumbled across the deck, our heads heavy, our throats burning, and laughter echoed everywhere. Every step sounded like mockery, every breath a reminder that we had lost.

Toad was still lying there, his eyes open but empty. He mumbled something incomprehensibly, as if he were already talking to someone only he could hear. Maybe to him. Maybe to himself. Maybe it didn't matter.

No one talked about the bet. No one talked about rum. But we all knew: it wasn't over. It continued as long as we drove. Every cup we found, every drop we shared – he was there. He drank with us.

And the laughter remained. It stuck to the ship like salt in the flesh, like bile in our hearts.

We had drunk against the Klabautermann. And we had lost.

Ghosts that won't let go

The night after the bet was heavy as lead. No one spoke of the Klabautermann anymore, no one dared. But everyone could still hear him laughing, somewhere in the woodwork, deep in the belly of the ship.

Then the shadows came. They were fleeting at first. One man swore he heard footsteps, right behind him, but there were no footsteps. Another claimed he saw one sitting at the masthead, a figure singing—but when he looked up, the place was empty.

We gave up looking for explanations. Were they remnants of the intoxication? Were they just illusions? Perhaps. But then why did everyone hear the same thing? Why did every gust sound like a whisper, every thud of the sea like a word?

I saw it myself. At the wheel, where the old man usually stood. He was there for a breath. Pipe in his mouth, hands on the wheel. I blinked – and there was nothing but empty wood. But the smoke still hung in the air, so salty, so acrid, that I had to cough.

The worst part was that we got used to it. A shadow here, a whisper there. Men turned around, stared into space, and just shrugged their shoulders. As if they'd been expecting it. As if it had long been part of the experience.

Some laughed nervously. Others prayed. Still others simply talked to the voices as if they were neighbors.

The ship was no longer quiet. It was full of guests no one had invited – and yet they wouldn't leave.

And in every shadow, in every whisper, lay the same thought: We are not alone. We never were.

It began with a laugh. A laugh we all knew—rough, off-key, a note too high, like that of a man who always drank more than he could handle. We turned around, and there he sat: Haken-Jens.

He was sitting in his old spot, on the starboard side, where he used to scribble maps that no one ever understood. Except he was long dead. We had seen him slide into the sea ourselves, with his eyes open and a rope around his waist, weeks ago.

"By God..." Vogel muttered, pale as salt. "That's Jens." "Nonsense," the Scotsman snarled, but his voice was shaky.

Jens grinned, raised his hand as if to lift a cup, and whispered, "Your rum still tastes awful." Then he dissolved, like smoke torn by the wind.

But he wasn't the only one. The next evening, we heard footsteps, heavy, steady, like boots pounding on the deck. There stood Grosser Hans, broad as ever, bare-chested, his chest covered in scars. He looked at us, nodded, and some swore he grumbled, "Get to work!"—just like he used to. But he was long dead. He had fallen in the mutiny, the blade still in his stomach, before the sea took him.

And so they came, one after the other. Men we had known, men who had long since become part of the sea. They surfaced, fleetingly, always where they had once sat, slept, and laughed. One at the railing, another playing cards, another at the masthead. They whispered, laughed, hummed old songs.

Some of us greeted them like old friends returning. Others fled, pale, sweating, as if chased by ghosts. But no one could deny that they were there.

The sea had taken them. But the ship gave them back to us.

With each day, there were more of them. At first, fleeting shadows, then figures we clearly recognized, men who had long since lain beneath the sea. They didn't all come back at once—they trickled back like water through a leak. One in the morning, one at night, one in the middle of a conversation when no one wanted to listen.

The ship's belly began to creak, as if there were more footsteps on the planks than there were feet on board. In the darkness, we heard chairs being moved, cups clinking, voices murmuring. Sometimes there was a whole chorus of laughter, as if half a table was sitting directly below us. But when we descended, there was only the empty bottles—and the smell of cold tobacco, which none of us possessed anymore.

Things were no better on deck. Often, there was a figure at the helm that, at first glance, we thought was one of us. But then the shadow was missing, or the eyes were too empty, or the face was one that had long since disappeared into the sea.

It was worst at night. The hammocks swayed, and sometimes there were more people in them than there were men alive. You could hear breathing, see movement—but if you looked more closely, the hammocks were empty. Some refused to sleep anymore, crouching with their eyes open just to avoid waking up next to a dead man.

Soon we were no longer sure how many of us there actually were. Twenty? Thirty? Less? More? The spirits mingled among us, taking up space as if they had never been absent. And we felt smaller, weaker, more scattered.

One whispered, "We are the minority." And no one objected.

The ship was full. Fuller than ever before. But not with life. With all those who wouldn't let go.

It didn't take long for us to understand the rule: Whoever fell, stayed.

Not in the sea, not gone—he stayed here, among us. We had seen it with Toad when he collapsed on the night of the Klabautermann. His body lay there, heavy, empty, but the next evening we heard him coughing, saw him standing in the shadow of the cabin, with the same glassy eyes as at the end.

"He's still here," Vogel murmured, pale, his voice thin. "Just... different."

And he was right. Every dead person never left us. They didn't move away, they didn't perish; they simply peeled off their skin and remained as a voice, a shadow, a cold breath.

The ship was no longer a vehicle. It was a gathering place. A storage facility. A barrel that never runs empty, no matter how much flows into it. And we, who were still breathing, were only the minority, guests among all the voices that wouldn't let go.

Some began to say that this was precisely the price. That survival didn't mean remaining free, but merely reserving the next spot in the shadows. Every day gained wasn't a victory—it was just a wait to become one of them.

That made everything harder. Eating, drinking, working—what was the point? Why toil if you were just going to stay here in the end, part of this floating grave?

But no one spoke out loud. We pretended we didn't know. But everyone saw the truth in each other's eyes: We were no longer on the move. We were on probation.

The sea took our bodies, yes. But the ship—the ship kept our spirits.

And it wouldn't rest until we were all part of it.

At first, we avoided them. We averted our eyes when one of the shadows sat at the table, we held our breath when a whisper drifted through the planks. But at some point, the silence became more difficult than the speaking. And one of them started.

It was the Scotsman. He was crouching at the wheel, looked at the empty seat next to him, and muttered, "Well, old dog, still better on the course than me?" – and he laughed hoarsely. Some swore the shadow next to him nodded.

From then on, the inhibitions fell away. Men sat at the tables and talked as if the dead were still part of the crew. Questions, answers, curses. Sometimes it seemed as if the silence spoke back. One swore he heard a song, half sung, half whispered, and he joined in until others joined in.

We began to learn things none of us could have known. A shadow whispered in Vogel's ear that the mast was hollow inside, full of rot—and sure enough, the next day a strut broke. Another warned of a rope that would break. It broke at the very moment we were avoiding it.

But not every voice brought help. Some just laughed, mocked, reminded us of guilt, of betrayal, of old blows that had never been forgiven. Some sang funeral songs, softly, even in our dreams.

Soon we no longer knew who was alive and who wasn't. A man spoke in the gloom, and you couldn't tell whether he was flesh or fog. Hands grasped ropes, voices gave orders—and we obeyed without checking whether anyone was even there.

The ship was full. Not just with us, not just with them. It was a single choir, in which no one could tell whose voice was actually commanding.

And that was the worst part: We listened. We obeyed. Because what if the spirits were steering the ship better than we were?

It was a night when the moon hung pale above us and the sea lay flat as glass. No one was speaking, no one was drinking, no one was sleeping. We just sat there, listening to the creaking, the whispering, the humming of voices that no longer belonged to us.

There he was.

Not with a roar, not with a storm, not with thunder. He simply stood there, at the wheel. Where he had always stood. Hands on the wheel, his pipe in his mouth, smoke that came not from fire, but from something deeper.

No one called. No one dared to say the name. But we all saw him. The captain.

His face was no longer flesh. It was a shadow, a play of light and dark, yet harder than any scar he had ever borne. His chest didn't rise, his eyes were holes—and yet they captivated us, as if we were standing before a judge.

He didn't speak. He didn't have to. His silence was heavy enough. Some immediately lowered their heads, as if caught. Others stared at him, open-mouthed, unable to look away.

The ghosts around us grew quieter. Even she. As if his mere appearance had silenced them. The entire ship held its breath.

And the wheel turned. Slowly, creaking, beneath his hands. No wind, no current – but the ship obeyed. We felt it righting itself, being set on a course none of us knew.

Then we realized: He had never been gone. He had only waited. And now, with an army of shadows behind him, he no longer needed a voice.

The captain was back. Not as a man of flesh. But as the master of the ship, as he always had been.

In the morning, the place was empty. No captain, no smoke, no shadow. Only the wheel, silent, wet with dew. And yet each of us knew it was still there—not visible, not tangible, but there.

The ship had changed. It was no longer ours. Every nail, every rope, every plank was filled with voices. When we pulled a rope, it creaked as if someone were groaning underneath. When we looked up the mast, someone swore a figure had waved back. Even the wind seemed to carry words, old, strange, but understandable enough to make us shiver.

We barely spoke to each other anymore. We talked more to them. We knew it, and we also knew it was wrong—but it was easier to talk to those who no longer had any doubts. The dead were more certain than we were.

And so everyone huddled in their corner, whispering, grinning, nodding into the void. Sometimes someone laughed, as if they'd just heard the best joke, but none of us had told it. Sometimes someone nodded, as if they'd received an order—and followed it.

Then we realized what we had become: guests. Intruders. Flesh that hadn't yet rotted. The ship didn't belong to us. It belonged to them.

And the sea seemed content with that. It carried us onward, calmly, indifferently, as if it were glad that we had finally stopped resisting.

We knew: none of us would leave this deck alive. We would stay, just as they stayed. Shadows in the wood, voices in the wind, pipe smoke without fire.

The ship was a grave. And we were already inside.

The Dutchman drives through you

It was one of those evenings when the sea looked as if someone had poured out the sky—leaden, heavy, endless. No wind, no sound, only the creaking of the planks and the breathing of the men. We stood languidly on deck, each preoccupied with our own thoughts.

Then came the scream. High above, from the crow's nest, sharp as a knife:

“Sail! Sail on the horizon!”

Everyone jumped. Heads jerked, hands clutched the railing. We stared into the distance, our eyes burning with salt and hope. And then we saw it.

At first, just a shadow, black, thin, like a line against the leaden sea. But it grew. One sail. Two. Three. Dark, mighty, but silent. No wind inflated them, and yet they glided forward, faster, closer, as if propelled by the sea itself.

"A ship," Vogel whispered, his voice more wishful than certain. "A real ship..." But no one believed him. What was coming toward us was too smooth, too black, too silent.

We held our breath. Even the sea seemed to beat more quietly.

And then we knew: This wasn't a ship like ours. No trade, no cargo, no rescue. This was the Dutchman. The black one. The accursed one.

It stood on the horizon, huge, heavy, and yet it moved like a shadow, not like wood. No water broke against its bow, no keel cut dragged behind it. It was simply there.

And with every heartbeat he came closer.

We stared out, and the Dutchman grew. Not quickly, not suddenly—steadily, inescapably, as if he had never done anything but move toward us.

The strangest thing was: the sea didn't move. No foam on the bow, no waves to betray his weight. He glided over the water as if it were glass, as if he were no heavier than a shadow cast across a wall.

"Something's wrong," murmured the Scotsman, his voice hoarse. "No ship sails without wind." "Perhaps it doesn't need one," whispered Vogel.

The closer he came, the more we felt it: the cold. First in the air, then in our bones. It crept through our clothes, settled in our flesh, settled in our hearts. We shivered without freezing—it was a trembling that ran deeper, a trembling that came from the soul.

The Dutchman's sails were black as tar, hanging heavy yet full, as if driven by an invisible storm. The wood gleamed darkly, wetly, but not a drop fell back into the sea. No cry, no command, no song reached us from him. Only silence.

We shouted, we screamed, we flapped sails, we tugged at the oars, but our own ship barely responded. It was as if the ropes no longer held any hold, as if the wood was too heavy to move.

And the Dutchman came closer. Closer and closer. So large that he swallowed the horizon, so still that even the sea seemed to breathe, more slowly, more cautiously.

We knew: He wasn't avoiding us. He wasn't being considerate. He was coming.

And nothing in the world would stop him.

We shouted orders, pulled on the sails, threw oars into the water, as if we could deceive him, escape him, do anything. But nothing helped. Our ship no longer obeyed. It lay there, rigid, as if nailed to the spot, while the Dutchman grew larger and larger.

It came head-on toward us. No change of course, no flinching. Just this inescapable line that drew us into the abyss. Some jumped to the railing as if trying to escape into the sea, but even the water seemed too hard, too rigid, as if it would push them back.

"Hold on tight!" someone yelled, but for what? We expected the impact, the crash of wood on wood, the splintering of planks, the downfall.

But things turned out differently.

The Dutchman didn't touch us. He didn't push. He didn't pull. He simply glided through us.

A moment that lasted forever. Sail against sail, mast against mast, deck against deck. No bang, no splintering, just a deep roar that vibrated in our bones, as if we ourselves were the wood it pierced.

The planks beneath our feet turned black, transparent, vanishing for seconds, and we stood there, half in nothingness, half in the shadow of the other ship. Men screamed, screaming voicelessly as the air was sucked from their lungs.

And yet – the ship didn't break. We broke.

As it passed through us, each of us felt something different. Some writhed as if their hearts had been ripped out. Others just stared, eyes wide, as if they had seen things not of this world. Some simply fell over, motionless, like empty sacks.

The Dutchman drove through us. Not to destroy us. But to show us that we were no longer anything.

It was as if the ship itself had penetrated us, not just through wood and sail, but through flesh and soul. Each man felt it differently, and yet we all screamed the same silent agony.

The Scotsman immediately fell to his knees. He pressed his hands to his chest, gasping as if someone were tearing his ribs apart. "Ice," he whispered, his lips blue, "Ice in my heart." And then he spat out water, even though he had never opened his mouth.

Borke stood frozen, his eyes wide open, his face rigid, as if someone had driven a nail through his skull. Later, he murmured that a hand had entered his head, rummaged through his thoughts, rummaged through them like dirt—and taken something out. Something that never came back.

Vogel screamed. A scream so high-pitched it almost sounded inhuman. He held his throat, gasping for air, but his lungs remained empty. He thrashed like a drowning man, right there on the deck.

Others froze, others fell over, others just stared into the air, their eyes as empty as sails in a calm. Every body trembled as if it were simultaneously freezing and burning.

And myself? I felt a knife. Not in flesh, not in bone—deeper. As if a blade were being drawn through my soul, slowly, without haste. Not pain as we know it—worse. It was a feeling of loss. As if something was being ripped from me that I could never get back.

And above all there was this silence. No crash, no thunder, no impact. Just this piercing, omnipresent feeling: He hadn't driven through the ship. He had driven through us.

And we knew: none of us was the same after that.

As it penetrated us, it wasn't just cold. It was faces. Voices. Entire lives that plunged into us in a heartbeat.

The Scotsman saw his mother. So clearly, as if she were standing before him. Only she was long dead, burned in a village he always talked about when he'd had too much rum. She stood there, looked at him, smiled—and then her eyes filled with water, she collapsed, drowned before his eyes. He fell, pounded his fists on the deck, tried to pull her up, but she was just fog, smoke, agony.

Borke whispered a name. That of a woman he'd left behind in Amsterdam. He saw her, heard her laugh—and then he saw her face disintegrate, crumbling, as if salt were eating it from the inside. He didn't scream. He just stared, his teeth bared, as if he were trying to bite death itself.

Vogel cried because he saw a child standing on the shore. A child he had never known, a child he had perhaps only dreamed of. It waved to him, laughed—and then the sea reached out and pulled him in, without a sound, without resistance. He stretched out his arms, stumbled, fell, and we had to grab him to keep him from going overboard himself.

Others saw comrades. Men who had long since fallen into the sea. They sat there, laughing, toasting, singing old songs – and then, one by one, they toppled over, disappearing, leaving only the echo behind.

And myself? I saw the sea. No face, no voice. Just the sea. It stared at me, endless, black, with a patience that endured everything. It didn't speak. It didn't need to. I knew it would come for me someday, as surely as the sun rises again.

The Dutchman had driven through us—but he had left something for everyone. Not consolation, not hope. Only a mirror. Everyone saw their own hell, tailor-made, as precise as a pattern cut just for you.

And when he moved on, we were left behind – not empty, but full of images that consumed us.

And then he was gone.

As silently as it had come, it moved on. No thunder, no bang, no splintering. Only its black hull, slowly shrinking until it was once again a line on the horizon. A line that vanished like a dream too real to be dreamed.

But the sea was no longer the same. Neither was our ship. And least of all, we were.

The planks beneath our feet creaked differently, darker, deeper, as if they had swallowed something. The wood was colder, damper, full of shadows. Even the sails no longer flapped as they used to. They hung heavy, as if they bore a weight no wind in the world could ever lift.

Men lay motionless on the deck, their eyes open, their breaths shallow. Two were no longer moving. Whether they were dead, no one knew. But they weren't with us. Not anymore.

Others swayed, whispered, and muttered incoherently. Some screamed, as if they still felt the cold penetrating their bones. Some laughed, madly, harshly, until their voices broke.

We tried to restore order, but it was as if the ship itself were against us. Every step echoed like mockery, every plank seemed to whisper.

And the worst part was the silence afterward. Because it wasn't empty. It was full. Full of what he had left behind. Images, voices, faces. No one dared to close their eyes, because everyone knew: Hell doesn't come while you sleep. It's already been sitting beside you.

The Dutchman moved on, majestic, untouched. For him, it was nothing. For us, it was everything.

And we knew: He hadn't destroyed us. Not yet. He had only marked us.

We stood there like survivors of a storm, except there hadn't been a storm. No broken wood, no torn ropes, no fallen masts. And yet we were broken. Not the ship—we.

No one spoke. No one dared to break the silence the Dutchman had left behind. But everyone knew what had happened. Everyone knew that we were no longer whole.

Some just sat there, their eyes empty, as if they had lost a piece of their soul. Others groped themselves as if they could feel the hole that remained within

them. Some staggered around, muttering names no one knew, as if they had voices in their ears coming from somewhere else.

We began to understand: The Dutchman was not a ship. He was a judgment. Not the roar of cannons, not a sword, not a battle—but something deeper. He took what he wanted and moved on, inexorably.

Each of us had lost something. A piece of memory. A piece of courage. A piece of our soul. It wasn't visible, it wasn't measurable – but we all felt the emptiness. Like a tooth being pulled out: The gap was there, even if no one could see it.

And so each stood alone, silent, marked. No longer a brother to the other, just shells staring at each other.

We hadn't hit the Dutchman—he had driven right through us. And he had taken what he needed from us.

The rest was just ballast.

The silence that smells of blood

After the Dutchman had sailed through us, nothing remained except a silence that wasn't real. No more wind in the sails, no creaking in the masts, not even the lapping of the waves. The sea lay like stone, the ship as if wedged between heaven and abyss.

We stood on deck, each alone in our own skin, and listened. But there was nothing to be heard. Even the men's breathing seemed to be swallowed up, as if the air were too heavy to bear it.

One coughed—a short, dry sound—and immediately we all jumped as if he'd fired a cannon. Another dropped a bucket, and the impact was so loud in the silence that it seemed as if it would burst the sky.

We tried to move, but every step echoed like a crime. The wood groaned beneath our boots, but not the way it should. It sounded as if the ship were warning us:*Be quiet. Be silent. You're disturbing us.*

No one knew whether it was the ghosts left behind after the Dutchman, or the sea itself holding its breath. But we all sensed it: This wasn't peace. This was anticipation.

And with every minute, the fear grew that the silence would not only remain – but would want something.

The silence didn't remain empty. It filled, slowly, slowly, like water in a leaking barrel. Not with sounds from outside—but with ourselves.

We heard things we never wanted to hear. Our own blood rushed in our ears, loud as a storm. Every heartbeat sounded like a drumbeat, dull, unstoppable, unbearable. The cracking of a joint when bending over became a clap of thunder. Even the grinding of teeth, the swallowing of saliva, the pulling of breath – everything sounded too close, too big, too loud.

The men stared at each other, eyes wide, lips thin. Not because they were searching for words—but because they heard what the other was doing. The smacking of their lips as they chewed, the cracking of their fingers, the buzzing in their throats. Every sound became an attack, a blow, a sting in their ears.

Vogel held his hands over his ears, pressing them so hard that blood seeped from his nails. "I don't want to hear it," he murmured, "I don't want to hear it." But the harder he pressed, the louder the ringing in his head became, until he howled like a wounded animal.

One whispered, "I can hear my heart. It's beating too loudly. It wants to come out." He beat his chest as if trying to silence it.

We realized that the silence wasn't an external enemy. It had crept inside us, turning our bodies into instruments that played far too shrilly.

And everyone knew: One more day of this, and we would tear each other apart – just to get rid of the noise.

It was Vogel who spoke first. His voice was brittle, barely more than a scratch, but in the silence it was like a clap of thunder.

"Do you smell that?" he asked, his eyes flickering, his hands shaking. No one answered. We hardly dared to breathe. "It smells like iron," he whispered. "Like blood."

We snorted, dismissed it, but then others raised their heads. One nodded, another sniffed. And soon it wasn't just Vogel who smelled it.

"Aye," muttered the Scotsman, pale as salt. "It hangs in the air... like a slaughterhouse." "Or like a freshly sharpened knife," hissed Bark.

And suddenly we all swore we could smell it. A metallic, dry, heavy whiff that wafted through the planks. No real blood, not a drop to be seen – but the smell was there, clearer than any wind.

The men became restless. One began rubbing his hands as if there was something there he needed to get rid of. Another spat incessantly, as if trying to expel the taste from his throat. Some stood up, walked across the deck, and searched for a source—found nothing, only more silence that tightened around us.

Then we realized: The silence wasn't just empty. It was full. Full of expectation. It was like a mouth standing open, waiting for us to finally give it what it craved.

And we knew what it was: blood.

After the smell came the shadows. Not clear, not tangible—only in the corner of the eye. But that was enough.

One saw a figure scurrying between the sails. He swore it nodded to him before disappearing. Another claimed someone passed him while pumping—heavy, tall, with boots that didn't make a sound. But when he turned around, there was only the empty deck.

We began to stare at each other. Every glance was a suspicion. Who had moved? Who was just standing where there was now nothing?

"I saw you," hissed Bark, his knife already half-drawn from his belt. "Me?" growled the Scotsman, his hand on the rope. "I've been standing here the whole time." "Don't lie!"

So quickly, silence turned into an argument. A shadow turned into an accusation, an accusation almost into a fight. Only the fear of breaking the silence held us back.

But the movements didn't stop. Everywhere, all the time. A flicker on the mast, a silhouette at the helm, a head over the railing. Always there—and never tangible.

The men became nervous. Every time they reached for a knife, an axe, anything that promised safety. Every step they took sounded like an attack.

The silence lurked, and the shadows danced within it until we no longer knew whether we were seeing the living or the dead.

And worse still, we didn't know which side we were on.

It started harmlessly enough. A piece of bread, barely bigger than a fist, claimed by two men simultaneously. Under normal circumstances, one would have cursed, the other would have given in, and in the end, both would have laughed—or argued until one of them got punched in the nose. But now the air was too heavy, the silence too sharp.

Bark tore at the bread, the Scotsman held it back. A growl, a shove, then the knife flashed. No hesitation, no thought. The blade nicked the skin, a drop spurted forth.

And in that moment everything changed.

The silence absorbed it. It wasn't a sound, not a noise—but we all felt it. The silence grew thicker, heavier, as if it had been waiting for this very drop. The smell of iron, of blood, swelled, settled in our throats, in our noses, until we gagged.

Bark and the Scotsman stared at each other like animals who know more might fall. Their hands trembled, not from fear, but from the temptation to give more blood, just to break the tension.

But no one took the next step. Not because they didn't want to—but because silence held them back, like a predator that doesn't immediately tear its prey to pieces.

We all felt it: Silence wanted more. That one drop was just a taste. It was hungry, greedy, and it wouldn't rest until its belly was full.

We stood there, our throats dry, our hands sweating on the handles of knives and axes, and we knew: next time no one would hold back the blade.

Because the silence wasn't just there anymore. It was guiding us.

After the drop, everything changed. No man spoke loudly anymore. Voices became whispers, whispers became lip movements, and some even stopped even that. As if they feared that even breathing might irritate the silence.

We walked like thieves across our own deck, our boots creeping, our hands shaking. Every step was a threat. Every sound a guilt.

Vogel stopped talking. Completely. He just nodded, pointed, and shrugged his shoulders. When we asked him why, he wrote on the plank in charcoal:*The silence listens.*And no one laughed about it.

Some tied cloths over their mouths, as if they could muffle their own breathing. Others stuffed rags into their boots to stop the wood from creaking. We moved like shadows, but the silence was ever faster, ever closer.

It was worst at night. Some dreamed of sounds that weren't there—bells, gunshots, voices. Others woke up screaming and immediately covered their mouths for fear they had awakened the silence.

One of them, the Spaniard, collapsed one morning. He covered his ears, screaming soundlessly, his lips open, his face contorted. Then he banged his head against the planks, again and again, as if trying to crush the noise within himself. We grabbed him, held him tight—and at that same moment, many swore they heard the silence laughing softly.

We were no longer men. We were mouths that didn't dare speak. Hands that trembled, hearts that beat too loudly.

And in this fear we understood: the silence wanted blood, not words.
And she would get it.

In the end, it was clear to all of us: the silence wasn't peace. It was an animal. An animal with its mouth open, lying in the middle of the ship, waiting for us to feed it.

We felt it with every breath. The air was too heavy, as if filled with anticipation. Every drop of sweat falling from our brows sounded like a premonition. Every heartbeat pounded louder, as if calling:*Here I am, take me.*

One cut himself while sharpening his knife. Just a scratch, barely more than a drop. But when he fell, when the smell of iron touched the air, the silence

became so thick that we all froze. A few swore they saw the shadows twitch—as if they had licked them.

Then we knew: It wasn't our imagination. The silence smelled of blood because it wanted blood.

And worse still: it would drive us against each other. Every drop would bring us closer, slicing each other open just to feed the silence. Not out of hatred, not out of greed—but because the ship demanded it.

We looked at each other, our eyes red, our lips dry, our hands tightly gripped. There were no brothers anymore. No comrades either. Only victims. And hunters.

The silence had us in its grip.

And we knew: Soon it would drink.

Bones in the net, no fish

The rum was gone, the bread was hard as stone, the water rotten. We chewed on salted meat that had long since become more of a stench than food. Our stomachs growled louder than the men.

"We must fish," said the Scotsman, his voice rough, his hands trembling. "The sea owes us something." No one objected. Not because we believed he was right—but because we had nothing else.

The nets lay heavy in our hands, damp with the mold that had long since infected them. We had barely touched them on this voyage. What could the sea offer us but salt and curses? But hunger was stronger than fear.

One muttered a prayer, another spat over the side, a third cursed the heavens. And yet we stood shoulder to shoulder, the ropes in our hands as if they were our last hope.

"Fish," whispered Vogel, his eyes as wide as the horizon. "Just a few fish..." He said it so often that it almost sounded like magic.

We cast the nets. They fell into the water, spread out, and disappeared into the depths. A dull, soft sound that sounded as if the sea had simply nodded in boredom.

Then there was nothing. Only waiting. Only the creaking of the ship. Only the looks of the men hanging from the ropes as if by their own breath.

And in that moment, every thought was the same: If the sea doesn't give us anything, we are lost.

The minutes stretched on, each breath a rope around their necks. Then finally – a jolt. Barely noticeable, but enough to make the men jump as if they'd experienced a miracle.

“Train!” someone yelled, and we got to work.

The ropes were taut, almost tearing the skin from our palms. The net didn't come up easily; it stuck, pulled, and resisted, as if something hung below that wouldn't let go. We tugged, panting, drenched in sweat, every muscle burning.

"Heavy... damn heavy," growled the Scotsman, the tendons in his neck taut. "That must be a whole school!" Hope flickered, hot, dangerous. We could already hear the smacking, the chewing, as if we already had the fish in our mouths.

But the weight was wrong. No twitching, no beating, no living resistance. Just a dull heaviness, dead, silent.

"It feels like stones," Vogel whispered, his hands white from the grip. No one objected, but everyone was thinking the same thing.

We moved on, step by step, the rope digging deep into our palms. The planks creaked, the ship groaned, as if it itself didn't want us to bring this catch aboard.

And the closer the net came, the clearer it became: what we were pulling up was not life.

It was something else. Something that wasn't meant for us.

One last tug, one last tug, and then the net broke the surface. Drops flew, the water trickled from the ropes like black slime. We cheered briefly, shouted for cups and pans—until we saw what we'd brought back.

No fish. No scales. No fins.

Bone.

Ribs, bleached, porous, like wood left in the sun too long. A skull rolled across the deck, grinning at us with teeth that had long since ceased to bite. A hand, still connected, dangled in the net, its fingers crooked as if reaching for us.

For a moment there was silence, then laughter erupted. Hysterical, shrill, piercing. Men tossed the bones back and forth as if they were dice, as if they could be used to gamble for a better fate. Others screamed, cursed, and spat, as if the sea had mocked us.

"Back with it!" yelled Borke, grabbing the net and about to throw it overboard. But Vogel knelt down, picked up a bone, and stared at it as if it were gold. "Perhaps it's a sign," he whispered. "Perhaps the sea is warning us."

The Scotsman spat. "Warning? It wants to fill our bellies! But with us, not with fish."

We stood there, staring at the heap of death, dripping, clattering, wailing. And in every face was the same question: Was this an accident—or was this exactly what the sea wanted to give us?

The hunger remained, gnawing deeper. But the first catch was clear: bones. Nothing but bones.

We should have left it at that. Every one of us knew it. But hunger was stronger than reason. So we cast the nets again, dragging them deeper, further, as if we could force the sea to finally give us life.

Again, the same thing happened: the tugging, the panting, the burning in my arms. Again, the heaviness that didn't fit. And again, the surface cracked open—a white clatter instead of a silver shimmer.

This time it was legs, long bones, still wrapped in pieces of cloth, disintegrating in the water. Half a pelvis, a spine that thrashed across the deck like a dead snake. A skull, smaller than the first, perhaps that of a boy.

"Holy Mother..." Vogel murmured, making the sign of the cross, his fingers trembling. "The sea feeds us with ourselves," the Scotsman growled, throwing the bones back into the water as if to shake off the guilt.

But we didn't stop. We cast the net again. And again. And again. Each pull brought more of the same prey: ribs, skulls, entire skeletons. Men, women, perhaps children. Everything the sea had once taken, it now spat back into our ship.

The deck turned white with it. Bones rattled in the cracks, lay between the barrels, and rumbled as the ship rolled. Some shone like pearls in the light, others were dark, corroded by salt, brittle like old wood.

Soon we were ankle-deep in death, the deck covered like a battlefield, and yet no one was satisfied, no one was quiet.

Because the hunger within us grew stronger. Not smaller.

Soon it was no longer about fishing. It was about what the bones meant. Everyone had their own truth, and every truth was more dangerous than hunger.

"It's a warning," Vogel murmured, his hands full of ribs, which he pressed to his chest like relics. "The sea shows us what's coming. It says:*This is how you will end.*"Nonsense," growled Bark, throwing a skull overboard. "This is mockery! It's laughing at us. No fish for you, only what you'll soon be."

But the Scotsman lifted a bone and held it up to the light, gleaming white. "No," he said, his voice dark, "this is a gift. The sea gives us back its treasures. Gold, silver, they rot. But bones—bones remain. They are for us."

Arguments broke out. Some wanted to bury the bones as best as one could on a ship—to let them slide into the water, quietly, reverently, as if that way we could appease the spirits. Others screamed that we should burn them so they wouldn't have any room on deck.

But most simply held on tight. They turned skulls in their hands, rapped their tibias on the planks as if they were trying to make music. Some spoke to them as if they were old friends who had finally returned.

"Can't you hear it?" one asked with glassy eyes, his head close to his ear. "They're still talking. They're laughing. They're singing..."

We looked at him, wanting to object, but no one did. In the silence, many of us swore we'd heard something, too.

Thus, the bones no longer became prey. They became mirrors. Everyone saw in them what they feared—or what they longed for.

And the sea was silent. It was silent and grinned through a thousand empty teeth.

The bones piled up, clattering with every wave, rolling across the deck like dice in a cup. Some lay clean and white, others still encrusted, covered in algae, stinking of salt and mold. But no matter how many we had, we weren't satisfied.

The hunger remained. It gnawed deeper, bit into our guts, made us lie awake at night, made men growl like dogs.

And eventually, one of them began. A young lad, too starved to think straight. He picked up a femur, smelled it as if it were a piece of roast. Then he bit into it. His teeth splintered instantly, and blood ran from his lips. He howled, but he didn't stop. He gnawed, licked, sucked, as if he could still pull a piece of life from the dry marrow.

The others stared, some with disgust, some with envy. For there was a truth in his madness: better to chew bones than air.

Soon, more followed suit. One scraped the bones with a knife, licking the dust off the iron. Another boiled them in water that only made them more bitter. Some gnawed dully, silently, until their teeth broke.

Not everyone did. Some just sat there, staring out at sea, as if they could already see their own skeletons down there. Others wept quietly, holding the bones in their arms like children.

But hunger didn't care. It stayed, it burned, it grew. And it turned us all into animals—or worse: humans who thought they could trick the sea by eating what it had long since spat out.

But the sea laughed. We heard it in the rattling of our bones.

In the end, we realized we should never have caught fish. Not because the sea was empty—but because it had nothing left to give us except memories.

Every time we pulled in the nets, we didn't see other people's dead. We saw ourselves. We saw our faces in the skulls, our scars in the shattered ribs, our hands in the claws grasping at the deck.

"That's us," Vogel murmured, pale, his eyes red with hunger. "Not now. But soon." No one objected.

The bones became a mirror, harder and more honest than any map, any course. No fish for us, no food, no comfort. Only one promise: Soon you'll be filling your own nets.

We stopped throwing them overboard. We left them lying there. Between the barrels, in the cracks in the planks, under the hammocks. The ship itself became a net, and we were the catches in it, only not quite stripped bare.

Some placed the bones next to their heads to sleep, as if they were already getting used to their own weight. Others tied them to the ropes as a talisman, a threat, a sign.

And so we sailed on, with a deck full of bones that gleamed in the light like a sea of teeth.

We realized: The sea didn't want to feed us. It just wanted to show us what it would do to us.

The net wasn't a tool. It was a mirror.

And the hunger remained.

The song that nobody wanted to sing

It was a night like any other: black, heavy, windless. We lay in the hammocks, staring into the darkness, listening to the creaking of the planks, the dripping of water somewhere deep in our stomachs. Everyone was lost in their own thoughts: hunger in our bodies, tiredness in our heads, fear in our hearts.

Then came the sound.

At first I thought it was the rope moving in the wind. But there was no wind. Then I thought it was the wood moving. But it was different. Deeper. More even.

A humming. Quiet, barely more than a whisper, but still clear. It didn't come from a man, not from a throat. It came from below. From the ship itself.

I held my breath, listened. There it was again. A sound, drawn out, dark. Not a creak, not a squeal, but a melody.

The eyes of the men around us opened. One sat up, another turned his head. No one spoke, no one dared. But we all heard the same thing.

It wasn't a song you hear in taverns. Not a drinking song, not a joke, not a sailor's choir. It was a slow sound, solemn, sad, old. So old that you felt as if the sea itself had been humming it long before we were born.

The hammocks swung gently, as if swaying to the rhythm. The ropes vibrated gently. Even the water outside seemed to throb in time.

And we knew: The song didn't come from us. It came for us.

At first, no one dared to speak up. Everyone thought they were the only ones who heard it. A figment of our imagination, a remnant of the madness that had been brewing inside us for days.

Vogel pulled the blanket over his head and pressed his hands over his ears as if trying to drown out the sound. But after a few seconds, he yanked his hands away again because it was only getting louder inside. He looked at me, his eyes wide, and whispered, "You hear it too, right?"

The Scotsman nodded silently, his forehead moist, his lips bloodless. One after the other, until no one could deny that the humming was there—and that it was playing the same song for all of us.

"Who's buzzing?" someone finally asked, much too loudly in the silence. "No one," answered Borke, his voice trembling. "It's no one."

We searched, peered into the shadows, under the hammocks, at the mast, at the deck. But nowhere was there a man standing with his mouth open. Nowhere did a throat move.

And yet the melody grew stronger. Not louder, but clearer. More distinct. As if the ship had taken away its own voice.

Some held their hands over their faces, others stared into space, as if expecting to hear the lyrics at any moment. One began to sob, another to laugh, nervously, off-key, off-key.

The song was inside all of us. And the worst part was: no one could tell whether it began outside and flowed in—or whether it began inside us and flowed out.

All we knew was that we were listening to it together. And no one wanted it.

The strangest thing was that the song didn't sound the same to anyone. Everyone heard something different, and yet it was the same melody.

The Scotsman sat with his mouth open, his eyes empty, and murmured, "It's the song my mother sang when I was a boy." His voice broke, and he pressed his hand over his mouth as if he had said something treacherous.

Borke, on the other hand, laughed hoarsely. "Nonsense," he growled, "that's a drinking song from Hamburg. I heard it the first time I was in the harbor." But his laugh sounded crooked, and he looked as if he wished he'd never mentioned it.

Vogel wept. Tears streamed down his face as he whispered, "She whistled it. Always. Every night when I was lying in bed. My sister." He sobbed, covered his ears, and shook his head as if he could tear out the melody.

For me, it was even worse. I didn't hear a song from the past at all. I heard one I'd never known—and yet I knew it was mine. It was as if it had always been there, beneath my skin, in my blood, and the ship had simply exposed it.

That's how it was for everyone. One saw home, another a woman, another a grave. Some found comfort in it, others despair. But no one could escape.

We began to understand: The song wasn't coming from outside. It wasn't coming from the mast, the sails, or the planks.

It came into us – and played with what we had buried deepest.

At first it was just a humming. A sound in our heads that vibrated like a string. We kept our lips tightly closed, clenched our teeth, but eventually it became stronger than we were.

The Scotsman was first. A sound escaped him, barely audible, a growl deep in his throat. He immediately clapped his hand over his mouth, as if he had betrayed himself. But the sound was already there, hanging in the air, fitting seamlessly into the melody we all heard.

Then Vogel. His lips trembled, he shook his head, but words trickled out like water from a leak in a barrel. "La-la..." – quiet, fragile, yet part of the song. He wept as he sang. "I don't want to," he whispered, "I don't want to." But his voice continued.

Soon there were more. One mumbled, one hummed, one sang half-sentences in a language no one knew. Even curses turned into verses, unintentional, off-key, but still fitting.

We looked at each other, shocked, ashamed. But that only made it worse, because everyone saw: We were all fighting. And we were all losing.

I pressed my lips together until they turned white. But my tongue moved, my throat vibrated, and before I knew it, I too was humming, quietly, barely audibly, but clearly enough that I knew I belonged.

The song didn't force us. It lured, pulled, and softened us until we could no longer resist.

And so we sat there, half a crew, singing and crying, laughing and cursing, trembling and muttering.

A song that no one wanted – and yet we all sang it.

At some point, a few couldn't take it anymore. "Enough!" roared Borke, his veins bulging in his neck, "I won't let anyone tell me what to sing!" He stomped his feet and kicked a barrel, sending it rumbling over the floor. The wood cracked, the planks shook—and yet it sounded like drums in time with the song.

The Scotsman tried screaming. A long, hoarse howl that made each of us shudder. But that, too, blended in, as if it were just a high-pitched voice in the choir. He fell silent, stared into space, and his knees buckled.

One of them started whistling. Wildly, off-key, harshly. But the whistle bent, fell, rose—and before we knew it, it was part of the melody, flowing, soft, as if the song had long ago known it.

Curses, screams, blows—no resistance remained. Everything was swallowed, molded, and returned. Even the cough of an old man sounded like a verse, even the creaking of the ship was in rhythm.

We realized: You couldn't fight it. The more you raged, the deeper it pulled you in. Resistance was just a new verse.

And so we sat, with trembling lips, with broken voices, and knew: We were no longer singers, no longer men, no longer free voices.

We were instruments.

And the song played us.

It was the Spaniard who refused. From the very beginning, he had pressed his lips together, his hands to his ears, as if he could erase the song with them. He didn't hum, he didn't mumble—he fought.

"I won't sing," he gasped, his eyes wide, sweat dripping from his forehead. "Never! Not with you, not with this... thing."

He pressed his mouth shut so tightly that blood seeped from his lips. He held his breath, his face turning red, then blue. We saw his chest rise and fall, his struggles, but he didn't give in.

Seconds felt like an eternity. We heard the melody in our heads, loud, demanding, greedy—and he, the only one who held his ground, with closed lips, his throat swollen.

Then he broke. Not by giving in, but by his body. He fell forward, hitting the planks hard, his eyes wide open. No more movement.

We stared. No one dared to touch him.

And then we saw it. His lips. They moved. Very faintly, barely more than a twitch. But clearly enough: They formed sounds. No air, no voice—only the movement of the song, as if it wouldn't let him go even in death.

One of the men burst into sobs, another laughed, madly, shrilly. I could only stare until the cold crept through my bones.

The Spaniard was dead. But he still sang.

And we knew: We too wouldn't stop, as long as we were breathing. Not even afterward.

In the morning, the Spaniard was still lying on the planks, his eyes open, his mouth half-open. No one dared to throw him overboard. We knew it wouldn't

have changed anything. Even if he were floating down in the water, he would have sung along.

And the song—it was no longer silent. It wasn't loud, not shrill, not like trumpets. It was simply there. Like breathing. Like the beating of the heart. A sound that never stopped, that lay in the creaking of the planks, in the rustling of the wind, even in the dripping of water.

We walked around, each with our heads bowed, our lips moving silently. Some hummed, some murmured, some growled deep in their throats. It wasn't intentional. It happened. The will was no longer worth anything.

One tried to curse – but the words bent, slipped into the melody, and became a new verse. Another spat, but even the splashing in the sea sounded like part of the song.

We realized: It was no longer about who sang along and who didn't. It was singing to us. We were merely the throats through which it spoke.

And the sea answered. The beat was heard in the swell, the verse in the foam, the echo in the wind. Even the seagulls circling far above us called in the melody until they disappeared.

The song no one wanted to sing had become a part of everything. Of the ship. Of the water. Of us.

And we knew: It would remain until we all fell silent. And even then, it would continue to sound, somewhere between waves and bones.

A lament. A curse. And our only companion.

Gold rots, salt remains

It began with a clang. Deep down, in the damp belly of the ship, where hardly anyone would go voluntarily. A few men had gone out to look for the remains of water barrels – and stumbled upon something else.

A chest. Old, heavy, the iron around it long since reddened with rust, the wood cracked from salt. It stood there like an animal just waiting to be rediscovered.

"A box!" someone shouted, and the news spread faster than a scream in a storm. Within minutes, we were all crowded into the dark belly, lanterns flickering, breath gasping. Everyone wanted to see it, everyone wanted to touch it.

The chest was barely moveable. It was stuck to the ground as if the sea itself had held it there. We pried at it with crowbars, knives, and our bare hands. The iron squeaked, the wood cracked, and splinters flew.

"Gold," whispered Vogel, his voice barely audible but greedily. "It must be gold." "Or silver," growled the Scotsman, his eyes gleaming. "Or precious stones..."

Greed overcame reason. We pushed, pulled, cursed, and sweated until the lid finally gave way. With a final crack that echoed through the darkness like a gunshot, the chest burst open.

And in that moment, no man was a sailor anymore, no man a brother anymore. Each of us was just a wolf, our eyes full of hunger—but not for bread. For glory.

We had made the discovery. And the ship held its breath.

The light from the lanterns shone into the box – and everyone paused for a moment. There it was: gold.

Coins, chains, rings, chalices. A heap of brilliance, like something from another world. The men's eyes widened, hands shot out like claws, greedy, trembling, impatient.

“Holy Mother… we are rich!” Vogel gasped, and his laugh was so sharp that it almost sounded like crying.

Fingers grabbed, clawed, and snatched, but the next moment the joy turned into terror.

Because the gold didn't hold.

A coin, barely in the hand, crumbled to dust, slipping through the fingers in a gray shimmer. A chain fell apart, link by link, until only scrap remained. A ring, just a moment ago shiny, shattered like rotten wood.

The men screamed, laughed, and cursed. One pressed a coin to his chest as if trying to hold it with his heartbeat, but it crumbled, leaving only a verdigris imprint on his skin. Another bit into a piece as if testing it and spat out only crumbs.

"It's rotting," gasped the Scotsman. "Even gold rots here..."

And as the shine crumbled, something else remained. Between the cracks, beneath the dust, something white trickled out. Grains. Dry. Hard.

Salt.

One of them picked up a handful and let it trickle through his fingers. It stayed put, it didn't crumble, it didn't disintegrate. It was real.

The gold died in our hands. But the salt remained.

It should have been over. Everyone saw the coins crumble, the chains crumble, the shine turn to dust. But instead of letting go, the hands only grew faster, greedier, more desperate.

"No! There must be something real!" cried Borke, rummaging deeper into the chest as if he could turn back time with his bare hands.

The Scotsman ripped a chain from his fist, and they both tugged at it until it broke into pieces. Salt trickled out, clattering on the planks like a mockery. They fought anyway, punching each other as if the nothingness between them were a treasure.

Vogel knelt in the dust, gathered seeds, and held them up to the lantern. "Look! Look! There's still something shining! It's still alive!" His voice was shaky, hysterical, and yet others reached for the same pile, as if a miracle might lie there.

We screamed, we laughed, we fought. Some bled simply to hold on to the glimmer of something that had long since rotted away. Hands tore at hands, knives flashed, and yet in the end, nothing remained but dust under the nails.

And through the chaos, the groaning, the growling, we heard another sound: the rattle of salt trickling from every wrinkle, every crack, every crumbled coin.

The gold died. But greed didn't. It bit us hard, it blinded us, it made us fight, even when the price was nothing but dust.

And we didn't understand: the only thing left was the salt.

We searched further, dug deeper, rummaged through the chest with our hands and knives as if we could outwit the sea itself. But the more we pulled, the clearer it became: the gold was just a shell.

Coins that had just shone crumbled between my fingers. Beneath every crumb, in every crack, lay salt. Grains, white, sharp, indestructible.

Chains that crumbled in the hands left strands of salt behind, as if they had never been made of metal, but of petrified sea.

One held up a bowl, half-eaten, half-crumbled. He turned it in the light—and the last thing that remained was a film of white grains trickling onto his hand. He laughed, a sound somewhere between madness and jubilation. "Don't you see? The sea gives us what is eternal."

We ran our fingers through the grains. Hard. Rough. Real. Unlike the gold, which turned to dust, the salt held firm. It tasted of iron, of blood, of sweat. Of everything we knew.

And the more of it we held in our hands, the clearer it became: It was everywhere. In the cracks in the planks, in our beards, in our clothes, in our wounds. We had been carrying it with us for a long time, since day one.

“The gold rots,” the Scotsman finally said, his voice muffled, “but salt remains.”

We stared at him, our eyes shining, not sure if it was a warning—or a revelation.

For while the greed for gold had deceived us, a new one lurked: the greed for salt.

We sat among dust and grains, the lanterns casting a pale light on the chaos. Coins crumbled, chains disintegrated, jewelry rotted—everything that glittered was now rubble. Only the salt remained, dry, sharp, persistent.

"The sea makes no difference," Vogel murmured, his hands full of white grains trickling through his fingers. "Gold, silver, precious stones... everything rots. But the salt—it survives."

The Scotsman laughed hoarsely, a sound without joy. "Aye. We toil, we plunder, we kill for gold. And in the end? The sea eats us. Leaves us with nothing but salt."

Some mocked, cursed, and refused to hear the truth. But it hung heavy in the air like humidity itself. We couldn't talk it away.

One tried to stuff the last coins into the bag. But as soon as he touched them, they disintegrated, leaving only a trail of white dust behind. He stared into it, cursed, but we all saw: his bag wasn't filled with wealth—but with salt.

And in that moment, it seemed as if the sea was laughing. Not loudly, not audibly – but palpably. In the bones, in the stomach, in the throat.

We realized: Gold was just a dream, a fairy tale for children. Salt was the truth. Salt was the sea. Salt remained.

And each of us felt this realization creeping into our throats, bitter like bile, burning like firewater.

Gold rots. Salt remains.

As soon as the truth was spoken, the crew fell into the next delusion: salt.

They grabbed it, piled it into bags, filled cups, and tied it into pouches as if it were treasures of inestimable value. Each wanted more than the other. The greed that had nourished the gold now ate into the white grains.

"Mine!" growled one, squeezing a handful so tightly that it trickled through his fingers. "Give it here!" screamed another, tearing open a bag, fighting like a dog over bones.

And some went further. They ate it. They took grains between their teeth, ground them, chewed until they crunched. Lips burst, gums bled, throats burned. But they didn't stop. They swallowed, coughed, choked, and their eyes shone as if they had found eternal life.

Others sprinkled it on wounds, as protection, as a sacrifice, as a talisman. They tied grains of salt in rags, hung them around their necks, and stuffed them into

boots. Some whispered prayers into them, others just laughed, sharp, dry, mad.

The dispute over gold was forgotten. Now it was salt that set men against each other. A crumb meant power. A cupful meant wealth.

We looked like kings guarding piles of grain, but we were nothing but beggars gnawing at our own lips.

And the sea? It was silent. But I swore it sent us a breeze, salty and heavy, that blew across the deck. As if it wanted to say:*You understand. You belong to me.*

In the end, there were no coins left, no chains, no shine. Only piles of white grains scattered across the deck, collected in bags, hidden in pockets. Each of us held onto some of it, so tightly that our hands were sore, chapped, and bloody.

We stared at what remained. No glimmer, no wealth, no dreams. Only salt.

One whispered, "That's all. We won't get any more. There will never be any more." His voice was barely more than a whisper, but everyone heard it.

Another laughed, bitterly and dryly. "Aye. Gold rots, silver rusts. But salt remains. Always."

We looked at each other, our eyes tired and hollow, and knew: This was the choice. Gold was a lie, the sea had shown us that. Salt was the truth, coarse, hard, merciless—but real.

Some sprinkled it on their tongues, testing the taste. Sharp, burning, bitter. Others simply held it, as if they could possess something greater than themselves.

And then we realized: We were no longer treasure hunters. No longer robbers, no longer hunters. We were simply men who had been both blessed and cursed by the sea.

The sea had taken away our shine. It left us with grains.

And in the end it was enough because we had no choice.

Gold rots. Salt remains.

The last throatful of rum

It was Vogel who found it. He crawled deep into the ship's belly, searching for rope, anything useful—and stumbled upon wood. A dull thud, a hollow echo. A barrel.

"Here!" he shouted, his voice hoarse but full of fire. We ran downstairs like hungry dogs. There it stood, half-hidden behind old planks, covered in mold, the iron rusted but intact. A barrel of rum.

For a moment there was silence. No one dared to touch it. We just stared, each with a dry throat, each with the same hope in our eyes:*This is it. The last one.*

Then the whispering broke out. "How much do you think is in there?" "Is there enough for all of us?" "Just a sip, nothing more..."

The lanterns cast flickering light on the barrel, and it seemed to shine as if it were made of gold. We surrounded it, close, tightly, each with our breath hot on the other's neck.

The Scotsman placed his hand on the lid, almost reverently. "This is our treasure," he murmured. "Worth more than silver, worth more than life."

And he was right. At that moment, the barrel of rum was everything. Salvation, comfort, madness, hope.

But we also knew: It wouldn't be enough. Not for all of us.

And that was the beginning of the end.

We'd barely set up the barrel when the fight broke out. "I'll have the first drink!" snarled Borke, his fingers already on the bung. "I've worked the hardest for this accursed ship." "Worked the hardest? You eat more than you work," growled the Scotsman, roughly pushing him aside. "If anyone drinks first, it's me."

Vogel, still kneeling beside the barrel, clung to it like a lover. "I've found it!" he screamed, his eyes glowing. "Mine! Only mine!"

The voices grew louder, shriller, full of greed. Old scores came to the table. One recalled a stolen portion of bread, another a punch that had never been forgotten. Everyone suddenly had a right, everyone an old promise, everyone a debt to collect.

Fists flew, knives flashed. One fell, taking two with him, and the barrel almost tipped over. A collective scream erupted, and suddenly everyone stopped. The thought of spilling even a drop was worse than any wound.

We stood around the barrel as if it were an altar, sweating, panting, bleeding. Our knives remained drawn, our eyes red, our throats dry.

Everyone knew: This barrel was worth more than our lives. And no one was willing to share.

In the end, it was Borke who was faster. With a yank, he ripped the bung out of the barrel, and the smell of rum filled the ship's belly like a storm. Sweet, heavy, sharp—the scent alone made us dizzy, made our throats burn with greed.

"Cup!" he yelled, grabbing the first one within reach and holding it under the stream. It flowed in dark, thick, shining, like liquid gold, which was actually still worth something.

We stared. No man breathed, no man spoke. Every look was a dagger, every breath a curse.

Borke raised the cup, hesitated for only a heartbeat, then tipped it down. The rum ran over his lips, dripped down his beard, and he groaned loudly, deeply, as if he himself had swallowed the sea.

“By God…” he gasped, “this is life.”

He wiped his mouth, grinned, his eyes glowing like coals. For him, it was a victory, a triumph. For us, it was betrayal.

We looked at him like a man who had tasted immortality, while we were all doomed to die. Hatred, envy, despair—everything lay in those eyes.

One muttered, "He stole from us." Another, "He'll pay for this."

But no one moved. Not now. Not while there were still drops in the barrel.

Borke had the first sip. But everyone knew he wouldn't get away with it.

After Borke's swallow, the barrel stood like a judge between us. Everyone wanted it, everyone had to—and yet it was clear to everyone: It wasn't enough.

"We'll share," growled the Scotsman, knife in his fist, both a sign and a threat. "Otherwise, there'll be deaths before the barrel's empty." Some nodded, others gritted their teeth. But the fear of getting nothing at all forced us to agree.

One cup after another was filled. Sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the hand holding the creator. And every eye followed every movement, greedily, vigilantly, suspiciously.

The first one raised his cup and tipped it down – and immediately the others screamed that he'd gotten too much. Another only got a finger's breadth; he howled, raged, and threatened as if his life had been taken away.

We drank one after the other, each under the gaze of the others. It was not pleasure, it was not consolation. It was a tribunal, a mass where every sip was an accusation.

Some kissed the cup as if it were a holy chalice, letting the drops roll over their tongues as if it were the blood of the world. Others downed it hastily, as if fearing someone would snatch the cup from them before it was empty.

But no matter how much someone received, in the end everyone felt cheated.

We shared. But neither man felt satisfied.

The rum burned through us like a whip. Not much, barely more than a whiff for each of us—and yet it seemed as if we had emptied entire barrels. Maybe because we were so parched, maybe because we needed it so much.

The men screamed, laughed, staggered. One sang an old harbor song, crooked and off-key, but loudly, and soon others joined in. It didn't sound like joy—more like madness, like wolves barking at the moon.

Bark climbed onto a barrel, waving his arms, preaching like a priest: "We are kings! Rulers of the sea! No death for us!" Then he almost fell, was laughed at, and laughed himself until he cried.

The Scotsman grabbed Vogel, kissed him on the mouth, and laughed raucously while Vogel choked and cursed him. Another ripped open his shirt, danced bare-breasted, and screamed at the heavens as if he were daring lightning himself.

The darkness outside seemed to be drinking in. The sea was silent, but we felt it tremble, as if joining in our laughter. Even the sails fluttered, even though there was no wind, as if they were dancing along.

But as quickly as the joy came, it turned to dust. Laughter turned to roars, singing to bickering, dancing to squabbling. Fists flew, knives flashed, and throats were hot, greedy, as if they wanted more, even more, even though there was nothing left.

It was a celebration. A final revelry. A madness born of one sip too many and a thousand sips too few.

And deep down, we knew: The rum hadn't saved us. It had only pushed us faster into the abyss.

The keg was almost empty, the cups wet with only the remaining foam. We tipped it, shook it, tapped it, each greedily sipping the very last sip. And there it was – a thin stream, a drop collecting at the rim, dark, shining, heavy as a promise.

Two men jumped at the same time: the Scotsman and Barke. Both had blood in their eyes, both with their hands outstretched.

"Mine!" growled Borke, his fingers already on the cup. "Not this time," hissed the Scotsman, grabbing him by the arm.

They wrestled like animals, the cup tipped, the drop trembled on the rim. Everyone held their breath. Everyone wanted it, everyone would have killed for it.

A jerk, a push—and the droplet detached itself. Slowly, heavily, it fell, glittering in the lantern light like a jewel.

But he didn't reach a mouth. No cup. No tongue. He hit the wood.

A dull stain, then the deck absorbed it as if the ship itself had been thirsty. Gone.

We stared. First silently, then cursing, screaming, howling. One laughed maniacally, others beat the barrel until it splintered.

The last drop wasn't ours. It belonged to the ship. To the sea. To the Dutchman.

And then we knew: Even the rum had left us.

The barrel lay shattered in the corner, splinters of wood everywhere, the iron hoops loose, like the bones of a dead animal. Not a drop remained, not even a smell. The ship had swallowed everything.

We sat around it like beggars around a cold fire. No one spoke. No one dared to curse. Our throats were dry, burning, worse than before. The rum had lifted us for a moment—only to let us fall further.

Vogel cradled a splinter of wood in his hands as if it were a treasure. The Scotsman stared at the planks where the last drop had seeped, his eyes blind to the sight. Bark growled softly, a sound that was neither human nor animal.

Some laughed, dryly, voicelessly. Others wept silently. But it was all the same: emptiness.

We had fought, argued, drunk, cheered, hated—and in the end, nothing remained. Only an empty barrel, a sour throat, a ship drifting on in the darkness.

It was as if the sea had shown us one last time what we were worth. Nothing more than a drop, swallowed by the wood.

And so we sat there, silent, broken, empty-handed. No rum. No consolation. No dream.

Just the sea.

When the rats become captains

It began on a night when we thought everything was already lost. No more rum, no more gold, no more fish, only bones and salt. We lay scattered like wreckage, half human, half shadow.

Then they heard it: a faint scraping, a scratching between the planks. One immediately hit the ground, thinking of ghosts, of voices. But what emerged was worse.

Rats.

Not the skinny beasts you see in harbors, scrawny and timid. No—fat, glistening, strong. Their eyes sparkled like black pearls in the lantern light, and they weren't the least bit afraid. They climbed out of cracks, crawled over ropes, and jumped onto barrels.

One of them ran right over Vogel, who was slumped against the railing. He didn't even flinch, just looked at her – and she stopped, standing in the middle of his chest, staring back as if checking whether he still had enough life left in him.

Soon there were dozens of them. They scurried across the deck, between our feet, over the nets. Some simply squatted there, grooming their fur as if they owned the place.

We should have screamed, chased them, killed them. But no one moved. We had no strength. No anger. Only a strange knowledge: They weren't simply guests. They came because we were weak.

And in her black eyes lay something more than hunger. It was testing.

They didn't come timidly. No hesitation, no fleeing. The rats took the deck as if they had long since claimed it.

They ate whatever they found. They greedily gnawed on an old breadcrumb that had been stuck in the cracks for weeks. A piece of canvas, a scrap of rope—anything was fine with them. They scraped the barrels, licked the salt from the planks, and even nibbled on our shoes, as if testing how long we would last.

"Damned beasts," the Scotsman muttered, half-heartedly kicking at one. But she didn't move. She stopped, looked at him—and he pulled her foot back.

They were no longer afraid. They walked over our legs, climbed up our jackets, sat on the railing, and stared at us as if we were just another part of the ship.

And there was something cold in those looks. Not just hunger for bread. It was hunger for us.

Vogel swore he felt teeth tugging at his hand while he slept that night. Another woke up to a rat nibbling on his ear. We laughed nervously, but no one found it particularly funny.

The rats were full, strong, and shiny black. We, on the other hand, were pale, emaciated, and weak. And each of us realized: They were no longer guests on our ship.

They were testing us. They were just waiting for us to fall.

It began with a single rat. It didn't climb stealthily, didn't crouch—it went up, slowly, confidently, as if it had every right to do so. High above the deck, over ropes and planks, until it stood at the helm.

There she stood on her hind legs, placing her front paws on the wheel as if it were her throne. An image so ridiculous that some people laughed. A hoarse, uncertain laugh that immediately stuck in their throats.

Because at that moment, the ship creaked. Very quietly, but audibly. The rudder moved, just a little, barely a jerk – and yet we all noticed the course changing.

"Did you see that?" Vogel whispered, his eyes wide. "The ship... the ship is listening to her."

A second rat appeared on the railing, sticking its head out like a lookout. It remained silent, its gaze fixed on the darkness, as if listening for something hidden from us.

The laughter died down. No one grinned anymore. We stared, silent, filled with fear.

There she stood, a handful of fur and teeth – and yet she seemed more like a captain than any of us men.

The ship creaked once more, the sails twitched, even though there was no wind. And we realized: It wasn't our command that steered the ship. It was theirs.

At first we laughed, nervously, hoarsely, like men who don't know whether they're dreaming or already insane. A rat at the wheel, one on the railing—what was that? A stupid coincidence, nothing more.

But then more came.

They climbed out of cracks, out of crevices, out of the ship's shadows. Not in a wild tumble, not screaming. They ran in lines. Four, five abreast, tails lashing, heads raised. It wasn't a swarm. It was formation.

One rat stood on the mast, a second climbed higher, as if it wanted to take over the watch. Two others crouched beside the empty provisions crates, motionless as sentinels. The first one was still at the helm, her paws on the wheel, unperturbed, as if it belonged to her.

We held our breath. The laughter died. Because at that moment the ship creaked, the hull groaned—and the bow turned as if obeying an invisible command.

“By God,” whispered the Scotsman, “they are leading us.”

No one answered. No one laughed anymore. We just stared, unable to comprehend, and yet it was clear: the ship wasn't obeying us. It was obeying them.

And in the silence that followed, you could hear them squeaking. Short, sharp, like commands.

The laughter was over. Now the obedience began.

The Scotsman was the first to give up. He grabbed a knotted stick, rushed to the railing, and slashed at the animals. Two rats flew into the water, wriggled briefly—and were gone.

A few men cheered, shouting that the ship belonged to us, not the animals. We kicked, threw pieces of wood, and hit anything with fur with ropes. A brief sigh of relief, a last vestige of pride.

But it didn't help.

For every one that flew into the sea, two more appeared. They emerged from the cracks, crawled out of the shadows, scurried across ropes, so many that we couldn't even see them all. One smashed one with a knife—and the next morning found three more in his hammock, staring at him silently until he dropped the knife.

We tried to drive them away, but the ship itself seemed to protect them. Every footstep echoed too loudly, every crack sounded like a mockery. And at night,

when everything was dark, we heard them running—not randomly, not haphazardly, but in rhythm, as if they were marching.

Soon, no one resisted. Some out of fear, others because they realized it was all in vain. Anyone who killed a rat woke up with the feeling that a hundred eyes were staring at them from the darkness.

So we gave in. Little by little, deck by deck. Until we were just guests on our own ship.

It didn't take long for us to realize: we were no longer the masters on board.

The rats occupied the places that had once been ours. There was always one, sometimes two, at the helm, their paws on the wheel, their tails lashing as if signaling. High up in the masthead, some crouched, their black heads stretched against the wind, as if keeping watch.

Even by the crates containing the last provisions, they sat motionless like guards who knew full well that none of us had the courage to challenge them.

At night we heard them. Not just pattering, not just scratching. They walked in time. Clack, clack, clack. In rows, as if marching. A rhythm you couldn't see, but you could feel it – in your stomach, in your heart, in your bones.

We retreated. First from the railings, then from the barrels, and finally even from the ropes. Everyone found a corner, as far as possible from the rudder, the mast, everything that was once ours.

And the strange thing: the ship sailed more smoothly. There was less creaking, it rolled more quietly, as if it were following a safe course. Not ours. Theirs.

We stood on the sidelines, silent, weak, and watched as they took command. These were no longer blind animals. These were officers.

And us? We were just ballast.

In the end, we were left standing at the edge of the deck. No longer in the center, no longer at the helm or sails—we didn't dare. The ship no longer belonged to us.

The rats sat where we once gave commands. A whole flock at the helm, their tails in time, their heads raised like admirals. Others crouched on the masts,

peering into the distance, so silent they seemed like statues. The largest ones sat on the barrels, fat and heavy, as if they were kings on their thrones.

And worst of all: the ship obeyed them. The wind was light, the sea sluggish – and yet the bow turned as if following an invisible hand. A hand with claws.

"They've taken over," Vogel murmured, his voice shaky. "We're just guests now." No one objected.

We watched them, silent, empty, defeated. Some held their knives, but no one raised them. Because deep down we knew: This was no longer our fight.

The ship had made its choice. And we weren't the winners.

The coronation was complete. The rats were the captains. And us? We were the crew who no longer had a say.

The sky vomits us into the sea

It didn't start with thunder, or rain. It started with weight. The sky turned gray, heavy, thick like an old sack full of dirt. No more blue, no more light—just a color that consumed everything.

The sea was calm, but not peaceful. It lay there like an animal gritting its teeth before it bites. No waves, just a gentle rocking that was more of a warning than a calm.

We stood on deck, each with our heads bowed, but our eyes glued to the sky. You could feel it sinking, as if it were squeezing the air from our lungs.

"This won't be ordinary rain," Vogel murmured, and he was right. It smelled different. Not fresh, not like water. It smelled of iron, of rotten salt, of bile.

The ship creaked restlessly, as if it sensed the weight that had not yet been lifted. Even the rats seemed quieter, crouching in the shadows, their snouts raised as if waiting.

We held our breath, felt the tightening in our chests, and everyone knew: It was about to break out. But not as we knew it. Not rain, not storms – but something that meant more to us than punishment.

It was as if the sky wanted to vomit us out before we even opened our mouths.

Then it broke out. Not a gentle rain, not a trickle. It came down as if from a thousand open throats.

But there was no water.

The drops were thick, viscous, heavy. They stank of salt, of iron, of something bitter, something more familiar from the stomach than from the clouds. A broth that burned the skin and chapped the lips.

We screamed, spat, and wiped our faces—but it was no use. The broth ran into our eyes, our mouths, our clothes. One man, who drank greedily, believing it was water, immediately collapsed, choking, writhing, his hands on his throat.

“By God, this is poison!” roared the Scotsman, but his voice was drowned out by the crackling.

The planks glistened slimily, the deck tossed and turned like a second sea. The ropes were sticky, the salt inside them swelling, cracking, splintering. Even the sails hung heavy, dripping as if soaked with the filth.

We ran around, stumbled, and tried to fill buckets—the hope of drinkable water drove us on. But every sip tasted like hell. Bitter, burning, bilious.

Some drank anyway, out of desperation. Their faces contorted, their eyes bulged, and they vomited it up, right next to what heaven had given us.

And the sea below seemed to laugh. It greedily absorbed the broth, as if it had only been waiting for the sky itself to relieve itself.

It wasn't rain. It was vomit. And we were right in the middle of it.

Lightning ripped through the sky, bright, sharp, so close it made your skin prickle. But it wasn't normal thunder that followed. No crash, no rolling. It sounded like choking. Long, drawn-out, deep, as if the sky itself needed to release something that had been trapped inside for too long.

Then it came.

Between the spurts of the broth, clumps mingled. Dark, slimy, and smelly. Entire swathes of foam, mud, half-rotted seaweed, and more.

A piece of dead fish splashed onto the deck, bloated, stinking, its eyes bulging. Another followed, then dozens more, until we were ankle-deep among them. Some were half-eaten, others were nothing but bones that pierced our feet.

There was blood. Dark red, thick, collecting in the puddles, staining the planks, and running back into the sea. One raised his head and screamed that he had seen hands that had fallen with the boat—fingers, just fingers, which then disappeared.

We stumbled, slipped, cursed. Every flash of lightning brought another gag, and each gag spewed more filth upon us. It was as if the sky itself were spewing its entrails into the sea, piece by piece, gullet by gullet.

The men screamed, cried, and laughed. One ripped his shirt off and shouted against the storm: "The sea wants to eat us, the sky wants to vomit us up! Where does a human being belong then?!"

And no answer came—only another gag, another puke, another vomit of something that should never have fallen.

The deck became an abyss. The sludge flowed in streams, heavier than water, slimier, denser. It pooled, sloshing back and forth, as if we had two seas—one beneath the ship and one above.

We ran, stumbled, and clung to ropes as the ship creaked, swayed, and groaned. Every step was slippery, every grip slipped, hands covered in mud, eyes full of grime.

A man fell, slid across the deck, and hit the railing. We grabbed him and pulled, but he kept sliding, the wood wet and slippery. One last grab—then he was gone. Overboard. No scream, no sound. Just the splash, which was immediately swallowed up.

The currents pressed us to the ground, tearing at our legs and arms. One man was thrown against the mast, breaking his leg, screaming—but his scream sounded like part of the choking eruptions spewing from the sky above us.

We held on tight, clinging to ropes that creaked as the salt cracked them. The ship seemed to shrink, crushed, overwhelmed by what was falling.

And above all, this burden. Not a storm, not thunder—but the feeling that heaven simply wanted to get rid of us. Not through lightning, not through fire, but through vomit.

We weren't fighting the wind or the waves. We were fighting the disgust of the world that wanted to push us away.

And each of us knew: If things continued like this, it wouldn't be the sea that would take us. It would be the sky that would drown us.

There was no escape. Everything that fell found its way into us. Into eyes, into mouths, into wounds. The stench was so thick that it poisoned even our breath.

We spat, choked, screamed. But no matter how hard we tore our lips, the stuff crept in. It tasted of salt, of rotten bile, of rusty iron. Every drop burned, every bite stank of death.

The Scotsman drank in desperation, raising his hands to the sky as if to mock it—and after the first sip, he doubled over and vomited until blood came out. Another licked the planks, laughing, his teeth splintering from the salt.

Soon the entire deck was full of men writhing, coughing, and choking. Some spat overboard, others back into the sea, but it made no difference. You could no longer tell what was coming from the sky and what was coming from within.

The taste was everywhere. In the beard, in the hair, in the nails. Every pore seemed to sweat it out. Even the air was full of it—a putrid breath that seemed to suffocate the sea itself.

And while we vomited, the sky continued to laugh. Every flash of lightning was a burp, every clap of thunder a choking rage.

We lay there, our lips bloody, our throats burned. And we felt: We were just part of the same cycle. The sky vomited, we vomited. And the sea absorbed it, greedily, indiscriminately.

It was hell. And it had a taste.

As suddenly as it had come, it stopped. No more thunder, no more lightning, no more choking. The sky hung above us, empty, gray, limp, as if it had vomited out everything it contained.

The sea lay still. But there was no peace. It was the emptiness after vomiting—disgusting, sticky, rotten. The surface foamed, full of dirt, dead fish, and mud. The ship was sticky from top to bottom; every rope, every plank, even the sails hung heavy with the mess.

We lay scattered, panting, as if rinsed out. Some still had foam around their mouths, others rigid, our eyes empty, as if they had lost everything they contained. Our beards and hair were sticky, matted, and stinking. Every breath burned, tasting of rotten salt.

The rats had hidden themselves, silent, invisible. Even they seemed to have gorged themselves on the filth.

We stood up, one by one, staggering, powerless. It wasn't victory after a storm. It was the silence that remains when you've been spat out by the world.

The ship groaned and creaked quietly, as if it wanted to tell us: I'm fed up too.

And so we stood there, sticky, smelly, empty—and knew that heaven hadn't tested us. It had rejected us.

We stood there like spitted-out bones. The deck was sticky, the sky pale, the sea sluggish. No one spoke, no one cursed anymore. We knew what had happened: The sky itself had vomited us up.

"Not even the gods want us," Vogel murmured, his voice shaky. "We're trash."

No one objected. Because everyone felt it. We weren't victims of a storm, not prey to the sea. We were something even heaven couldn't swallow. Too bitter, too corrupt, too wrong.

We had hoped that heaven would test us. That it would strike us, break us, but perhaps also renew us. But this wasn't a judgment. It was an expulsion.

And that was worse than any lightning, worse than any wave. Because it meant: We no longer belonged.

Not to the sky. Not to the sea. Not even to the ship.

We were nothing but alien bodies, useless, rejected. Men who found no place even in the vomit of the world.

One laughed hoarsely, bitterly, without strength. "Aye... we're not even good enough for the abyss."

And the silence that followed was worse than any thunder.

Journeys without returning home

Sometimes, when the night was quiet and only the creaking of the wood remained, the men began to talk. Not loudly, not like before, with laughter and blows, but quietly, almost like children telling fairy tales around the fire.

They spoke of home ports. Of taverns where the beer was sweet and the air smelled of pipe smoke. Of women who knew their names, loved their scars, and had endured their fists. Of bread, fresh and warm, thickly sliced, with butter that melted on the tongue.

One remembered the sound of bells from the city. Another the smell of horses at the market. A third the taste of rainwater, fresh from the roof, purer than anything we had ever tasted here.

For a brief moment, it seemed as if we were back there again. As if we weren't on that ship, but in a tavern, with music, laughter, sweat, and wine.

But then it broke. Always.

The voices fell silent, the eyes went blank. Everyone knew they were only images. Shadows of something that no longer existed for us. No harbor awaited, no woman, no bread, no bell ringing.

We were too far. Not in miles, not in days—but in curses.

And each of us understood when he spoke: He wasn't telling a memory. He was telling a fairy tale. And fairy tales have no way home.

After one of those nights, filled with voices about bread, bells, and women, the Scotsman took out the maps. The paper was damp, frayed at the edges, the ink running. But he spread them out as if they could save us.

"Look," he growled, "this was our course. If we hold on, we'll hit land again."

We crouched around, staring at lines that ran like scars across the paper. One nodded, another cursed, a third spat. Hope flickered briefly—but only until we looked up at the sky.

No stars. No north, no south. Just a gray blanket, heavy and blind. We searched for a light, a sign, but there was nothing but darkness.

"Perhaps the map will suffice," Vogel murmured, but even he sounded weak. For while the map showed paths, each one ended in a circle. Arrows ran backward, lines blurred, as if the sea itself had consumed the ink.

We turned the paper over, searched, and compared. But no matter how we held it, it always showed us the same thing: Nothing.

“The cards lie,” the Scotsman finally whispered, and no one objected.

Because every course we chose only led us back here. Back to the same deck, the same planks, the same empty horizons.

The sea wasn't a path. It was a circle.

The hour came when no one spoke of the course anymore. Not of maps, not of stars. For we realized: We were no longer sailing across the sea. We had long since been imprisoned within it.

The ship was our cage. The railing, which once protected us, became bars. Every glance beyond showed nothing but the same sea, endless, repetitive, empty. No horizon changed, no sky opened. Everything was the same, as if we were turning in the belly of a giant who would never spit us out.

Some were still running around the deck, clinging to the ropes, pretending there was work to be done. But the truth was: everything we were doing was pointless. No course was moving us forward. No sail was catching the wind anymore. No rudder was steering.

We weren't sailors. We were convicts. The wood beneath our feet creaked like boards in a dungeon, the creaking sounded like keys being turned in our faces.

Even the sea was no longer outside. It crept in. In our nails, in our hair, in our lungs. We carried it within us, as it enclosed us. We were no longer humans sailing the sea. We were parts of it, swallowed up, bound.

"This is no longer a ship," murmured Vogel, crouching on the mast. "This is a coffin."

And no one laughed. Because we knew he was right.

In the silence, when no one could work anymore, we began to talk. Not loudly, not like sailors bragging. Quietly, brokenly, as if we were speaking in a dream.

One told of his child, who could barely walk when he left on a trip. "By now he'll probably be able to walk, run... maybe even talk." His voice trembled. And yet we all knew he would never hear it.

Another spoke of debts, of thugs waiting for him in Hafengasse. He laughed bitterly, saying, "Maybe this is even better. At least they don't beat me anymore." But even in his laughter there was sadness, because he knew he would never return to be beaten at all.

The Scotsman told of a woman. Hair like fire, eyes like the sea. He spoke of her scent, of her anger, of the nights he spent with her. Each of us listened spellbound, but at the end he looked down at the planks and whispered: "Perhaps I just imagined her."

So we spoke. Each of us brought something to the table: children, debts, women, streets, smells, songs. Everything we had left behind, everything we had thought we would find again.

And the more we talked, the clearer it became: these stories weren't memories. They were fairy tales. Perhaps true somewhere out there, but long dead to us.

We didn't talk to find hope. We talked to prove to ourselves that we had even once lived.

And sometimes, mid-sentence, one of them would stop. They'd look at us, their mouth open, and whisper, "Or did I just make it all up?"

It was Vogel who said it first. He sat on the mast, his eyes hollow, his lips chapped, and muttered, "We're not going home. We're never going home."

Some laughed bitterly, others cursed. But he didn't look up; he continued speaking as if he weren't talking to us, but to the sea: "It's the Dutchman. He's always sailing. Without a port, without a return home. And we're with him now. Whether we like it or not."

A silence followed. Heavier than any thunder. Each of us knew the stories. We'd heard them in harbor bars, at night when the rum was flowing. Stories of a ship that never saw land, of men who never got off the ship. Stories we laughed at until now we recognized ourselves in them.

"We have no course," the Scotsman said quietly. "No map, no stars. Just heading. Always heading."

Borke spat on the planks, but his face was pale. "Then we're doomed."

No one objected. Because we had felt it for a long time. Every day, every night, every breath was proof. We were driving, and we would continue driving. Without a destination. Without an end. Without a return home.

The curse was no longer a fairy tale. It was our course.

Soon we no longer knew which day was which. The sun, when it appeared at all, rose and set like a tired lamp, always tracing the same arc. The nights were only darkness, always the same, without stars, without direction.

We began to realize: We were sailing in circles. Not because we had set the wrong course—there was no course anymore. No matter which way the rudder turned, no matter how the sails were set, we always ended up back here. On the same sea, with the same gray horizons, with the same waves that returned like mirror images.

One swore he'd seen the same floating beam twice, on the same day. Another said the seagull that flew briefly over us was the same one as yesterday—or the day before. We stopped laughing about it. We knew it was true.

Time lost meaning. Hours didn't creep forward, they merely fell over one another like rotten wood. Days, weeks, perhaps months—everything was one, everything was repetition.

Some men stopped counting. Others drew lines into the wood until they noticed that the lines kept disappearing, as if the ship itself had no interest in our measuring.

We lived in a loop. One breath after another, without a goal, without progress. And each of us knew: This was madness.

The sea held us fast. The course wasn't a path—it was a circle.

And we were the rats in it.

In the end, we fell silent. No more stories, no more curses, no more songs. Only the breathing, the creaking, the eternal gliding through nothingness.

We sat on deck, each of us alone, our gaze fixed blankly on the gray. No one was searching the horizon anymore, no one was raising their head to look for land. Because we knew: There was none.

"It's over," Vogel whispered, his voice barely audible. "Not today, not tomorrow. Forever." No one answered. Because it was no longer necessary. We all had the same words inside us for a long time.

Homecoming was a dream we had cast off like an old coat. There were no more bells, no more taverns, no more warm beds. Only the journey. Endless. Pointless. Inescapable.

Sometimes one could still hear a quiet sob, a giggle, a murmur—but these were only echoes that soon faded away. Words were worthless if there were no ears left to receive them in the harbor.

We were no longer at sea. We were part of it. A ship that never docked. Men who never arrived. Voices that faded away in the wind.

And that was the end of all hope. For a journey without a return home is not a life. It is a curse.

The Dutchman stays

There was no more arguing, no more cursing, no more shouting. The men's voices had fallen silent, like hope, like time. Only the creaking of the wood remained, the eternal pounding of the sea that carried us and yet had long since swallowed us.

We lay scattered like wreckage on the deck. Some half-conscious, others with empty eyes, no longer searching for anything. No one spoke to the other. Why should they? Words no longer had any value. No harbor heard them, no ear in the world awaited our stories.

But there was something else. Something that hadn't disappeared. Not hunger, not thirst, not fear. It was a shadow, without form, without a face, and yet stronger than anything we had ever seen.

The Dutchman.

He didn't show himself. No figure, no man with a hat and a scar. But he was there. In the sighing of the planks, the creaking of the ropes, the dull rolling of the ship. We felt him the way you feel your breath on the back of your neck when you're standing alone in a dark room.

We had lost everything—rum, bread, hope, even our time. But he had stayed. And he made it clear to us: So had we.

Because once you stood on this deck, you never got off again.

The silence wasn't empty. It was filled with him. And we knew: This was only the beginning of the end.

We had always called the Dutchman a ship. A construct made of wood, rope, sails, and nails. But the longer we lived—or died—on it, the clearer it became to us: This was no longer a ship.

It didn't just groan in the wind. It moaned. It didn't just creak in the waves. It sighed, as if it had lungs deep in its belly, breathing with every movement.

The sails didn't flap, they puffed. The ropes didn't rub, they creaked like joints. Even the planks we lay on sometimes throbbed softly, in rhythm like a heartbeat.

And every time one of us jumped up to grab the wheel, we felt the resistance. Not just the wheel, not just the wind—the ship itself. It couldn't be forced, couldn't be bent. It went wherever it wanted.

"It's alive," Vogel whispered one night, his hand on the railing. "By God, it's alive." And no one objected. Because we all felt it.

The Dutchman wasn't our ship. We were his. We were just cells in his body, blood in his veins. He didn't carry us; he devoured us, piece by piece, until we were nothing more than a part of him.

It was no longer a ship. It was a being. And we were trapped inside it.

At first it was just a rustling. A sound in the ropes, as quiet as a sigh. We thought it was wind, a coincidence – but then we realized: It was speech.

Whisper.

Not from us, not from the men who were still breathing. The voices came from elsewhere. Old, brittle, salty, as if they had drowned a hundred times before.

“Turn west…” “The harbor is near…” “We're coming home…”

Words that made no sense, because we'd long known there was no west, no harbor, no way home. And yet we heard them, again and again, from the

shadows of the sail, from the cracks in the planks, from the breath of the wind itself.

Some swore they recognized voices. An old helmsman, a brother, a friend from previous voyages. Names long lost to the sea surfaced in whispers.

We listened, spellbound, half mad, half believing. But the longer we listened, the clearer it became: these voices were not speaking*to* us. They talked*through* us.

When someone slept, they murmured words that weren't their own. When someone cried, they heard strange names. Even in some people's laughter, something older than their own throats suddenly resonated.

The Dutchman was full of voices. Old captains, lost sailors, souls who had never come ashore. And now we were just the latest voices through which he spoke.

It was the Scotsman who found the courage, or rather the madness. He jumped behind the wheel, his hands gripping the wheel, his eyes bloodshot, his lips chapped from the salt.

"Enough!" he yelled. "We're not driving around in circles like cattle! I'll steer us out! I'll steer us home!"

His fingers dug into the wood, he threw his full weight against it. The wheel groaned, moved a bit, squeaking reluctantly. A sigh of relief went through the men—maybe, maybe.

But the ship laughed. Not out loud, not in words – but we felt it. The creaking of the planks, the twitching of the sails, the dull thud in the hull: mockery.

The wheel continued to turn, but not through his hands. It turned against him, slowly, relentlessly. His arms trembled, muscles tensed, sweat poured—and yet the steering wheel forced him back, as if he were a child straining against his father's arm.

"Help me!" he cried. We grabbed, two, three, four hands, all on the spokes, pulling, pushing, gasping. But nothing. The ship let us play, let us struggle—and held the course, undeterred, unbreakable.

In the end, the Scotsman collapsed, blood pouring from his palms, his skin raw, his will broken.

"It drives itself," Vogel murmured, his voice empty. "We have nothing more to say."

And that was the last time either of us tried to turn things around.

It wasn't a storm, a lightning strike, or a fall that took the next bird. He died, just like that.

He just slumped down, silently, in the midst of the silence. No scream, no struggle. One last breath, one look into the gray—and then he was gone.

We crouched around him, staring, no one daring to pray. What could we have said? God had long since forgotten us.

But then it happened.

His body lay motionless, but we still felt him. Not as a memory, not as guilt. No—we felt him in the ship. The creaking changed, as if a new sound had joined it. A deep, steady groan that had never been there.

"He's still here," murmured the pale Scotsman. And we knew he was right.

We heard it in the night. A whisper, a hum, sometimes even words. From the planks, from the ropes, from the breath of the wind. It was a bird—or what was left of it.

That's when we realized: None of us would disappear from here. Death was not an exit, not a way home. It was simply surrender.

The ship took him in. Just as it would take us all in. Piece by piece, soul by soul.

We weren't sailors on this ship. We were building material.

And everyone knew: When your breath stops, you're not free. You stay. Forever.

It was just before dawn when we saw it. A shimmer, far away on the horizon. Not large, not bright—just a stripe, thin as a blade, golden, warm.

"Land," someone breathed, and the word cut through the silence like a knife. We stumbled to the railing, staring out, our eyes wide, our hearts suddenly heavy. There it was. Clearly. A coast, a light, a promise.

One laughed, another cried, the Scotsman put his hands over his face. For the first time in ages, we felt hope in our stomachs—hot, burning, dangerous.

We adjusted the sails, tightened the ropes, shouted orders as if we were men again, sailors again, alive again. The ship even seemed to follow us, turning its bow, the sails taking on the wind. Everything seemed possible.

But the closer we got, the paler it became. The shimmer dissolved, the gold turned gray, the coast flickered like smoke. We ran, panted, screamed, until we almost had our hands in the sea—but there was nothing there.

Only fog. Only emptiness. Only the same old, endless gray.

The light was a mockery, a mirage, a scorn. No land, no harbor. Just a shadow the Dutchman cast before us to show us that he still had power over our dreams.

We stood at the railing, silent, trembling, and knew: The sky is laughing. The sea is laughing. The Dutchman is staying.

And we move on.

In the end, there was nothing left to say. No stories, no curses, no prayers. We sat there, scattered like bones on a beach, each alone and yet all in the same silence.

The ship was sailing. Not fast, not slow, just steadily, as steady as a heartbeat that never stops. We didn't know where we were going, and it didn't matter. The course wasn't for us. It was for him.

The Dutchman was no longer a shadow, no longer a legend. He was everything. He was the ship, the sea, the wind, the voices in our heads. And we—we had long since become part of it. No more men, no more crew, no more souls. Just pieces in the body of a being that never dies.

Some of us were still alive. Others had already fallen. But that made no difference. For we all remained. Alive or dead, screaming or silent—the Dutchman absorbed us, one by one.

We gazed out into the endless gray. No land, no harbor, no end. And we understood: There was no homecoming, no escape, no death.

The Dutchman stays. And we with him. Forever.

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