

The Riddle of the Pirates

Prologue:

The cell bars were grey, very grey. Their inmates had faces that were almost as grey, but unlike the bars, they were grey with fear. For they were pirates, captured pirates awaiting execution. But three of them had hope. Hope was rare in these cages. But these three had some, because the inmates of one of the cells were strong and the lock was rusty. It was to these three that their captain spoke at that moment: 'You know that you are my only hope, because I myself will not get out of here alive. So take this piece of wood! It's all I have; maybe all I ever had!'

Somewhat bewildered, the three pirates took the piece of wood: their captain must have gone mad; perhaps not surprising in the face of imminent death. When the captain fell asleep, one of the three looked at the wood. If you looked closely in the light of the torches, which barely illuminated the area beyond the cells, you could see symbols on the note: they had to be letters, carefully carved into the wood. Marik had to see this! He was considered by the others to be the smartest of the crew; after all, he was the only one who could read. Why? No one knew for sure and no one dared to ask: pirates were people without a history. Nevertheless, the crew had some stories about Marik: some even suspected that Marik was the son of a king who had abandoned him. When the wood was handed to Marik, he read slowly: 'W-o the-löw-e wo-hnt, die Kis-teim Him-mel thront!'

1.

It was winter. The snow-covered pavement of Braunschweig glistened in the light of the torch. The hand, red from the cold, that held the torch was absurdly small and belonged to Begina, Begina Harleb. She was thirteen years old, but very small for her age. Begina's father was a successful Hanseatic merchant and extremely ambitious when it came to selling his goods.

He was of the opinion that her twin brother Henning should one day accept his inheritance in order to become a sought-after merchant as well. Henning agreed with him completely! But Begina wanted nothing more than a glorious future as a merchant. Father and son were of the opinion that the merchant profession was not right for women and girls. They should rather sit around at home all day, take care of the household and wait for the husband to return. 'Well, that's a great prospect for my life!' Begina thought defiantly.

That was also the reason why she was now walking through the streets in the cold December weather. Begina could still remember her father's words exactly: 'You're a girl, you'll get married and take care of the house and children! There has never been a "Hanseatic merchant" and there never will be, do you understand me?

She ran away. Just up and gone. Away from her father, away from the argument, away from everything. She would prove that she would be as good a merchant as Henning. She would prove that there was more to life for women and girls than marrying and waiting for a husband. She would be strong. She would fight!

When Begina finally arrived at the small jetty of the Okerhafen, she heard the waves gently lapping at the bow of a small wooden boat. The water played with the planks, as if inviting them to play along, to dance with the waves, to follow the pull of the river out into the wide world. A world that was out of reach for Begina, a world she could only dream of.

As a merchant of the Hanseatic League, her father knew this wide world. He had been to so many different places in the world to sell his goods that Begina couldn't remember a number for it.

Suddenly she noticed a shadow flitting across the deck of the boat. Begina squinted her eyes to see better. But the darkness had already swallowed up the mysterious shadow. So Begina continued to follow the shoreline. An echo made her footsteps reverberate across the water and along the shore, making her afraid someone would notice that she was still out alone at this late hour.

Suddenly, another echo joined the sound of her footsteps. A shuffling, heavy noise. As if something were dragging along the bumpy cobblestones. Begina turned around slowly – and saw a, well, what actually? Or rather, who? Because there was a shadow behind her. She was sure it was the same one as on the boat. The shadow was wrapped in a coat, the collar pulled up so high that the face was hidden. He also wore boots that were so wide that they would be too big even for an elephant, and a hat that literally melted on his head. ‘W, who, who are you?’ Begina asked, stuttering. The shadow just grumbled something unintelligible and then gestured for her to follow him. ‘W, where are we going?’ Begina asked, even more frightened than before. ‘Follow!’ the shadow just managed to say. It was little more than a growl and his voice sounded as if he had only been drinking salt water for years. When Begina didn’t move, the shadow roughly dragged her into one of the alleys branching off from the harbour.

2.

The alley was the darkest alley Begina had ever seen, and by far the dirtiest, smelliest and shadiest. The houses on the left and right were more like piles of boards than houses, with locked doors and boarded-up windows. An icy shiver ran down Begina's spine. It was strange, she had never been here before, although Begina could have sworn that she knew every single street in Braunschweig.

The shadow pushed her into one of the houses, which was so dilapidated that it could hardly be called a house.

‘Hey, what's going on?’ she protested. “Come with us!” the shadow ordered, growling. Since there was no point in trying to wriggle out of the shadow's arms – she wouldn't make it anyway – Begina let herself be dragged into the dilapidated house.

It was definitely a dilapidated house: from the outside as well as the inside. They were in a small, square room. The floor was covered with dust, making it look like a grey carpet. There were piles of candle ends and food scraps on a round, brown table, and straw lay on the floor, dripping with stale rainwater under the broken windows. ‘W-what do you want from me?’ Begina asked anxiously. ‘Let's get straight to the point...’, the shadow grumbled. “If you help us with a tiny little matter, we'll make sure you can accept your father's inheritance and become a merchant of the Hanseatic League.” “And who are you?” Begina asked. “That's not important...”, the shadow growled. ‘How am I supposed to make a pact with you when I don't even know what I'm supposed to do and who you are? And anyway, where are the others?’ Begina wasn't going to be fobbed off that easily.

‘Very well. I'll give you the answers and you give me your promise,’ the shadow relented. “What promise?” she asked. ‘All right, but I won't tell you gently! My name is Marik and I come from Lübeck. You have the task of spying on the Braunschweig merchant network, your father, and reporting back to us. In return, we will make sure that you become a merchant of the Hanseatic League.’

Begina staggered backwards. That was too much! How did he know her father? What did he know about her dreams? Her father had always warned her about shady characters, scoundrels, robbers and pirates, and now she was being kidnapped! But then the pieces of the puzzle fell into place in her mind. The voice of the shadow, Marik, had sounded as if he had only been drinking salt water for years, which was probably the truth. And his clothing was not that of a Hanse merchant from Lübeck. That was how Begina imagined a pirate! The boat he had come across was probably the pirate ship. And by ‘we’ he meant his crew! But what were pirates doing so far inland, on a small boat in a tiny Okerhafen, which was more worthy of the name boat dock? And what he asked of her! Even if Begina didn't like her father, she didn't want to betray the entire dealer network of Brunswick! But how should she behave – in this house, in this alley, in this darkness. However she turned it around – when Marik looked at her questioningly, there was only one answer. ‘Yes,’ she

stammered.

As the shadow left, he whistled a tune. A tune that made her think of wild Cape voyages, lonely beaches and hidden treasures. It was only long after the shuffling footsteps had faded away that Begina dared to leave the house again. 'We'll talk,' the shadow had said to her as he left her behind. 'Hopefully not,' Begina had thought, holding her breath.

As she approached the door, she stepped on something hard. She picked up a piece of wood and held it up to the dim light. A note made of wood! The pirate must have lost it.

3.

The boat rocked up and down as they moored at one of the small ports of Braunschweig. But could you call it a harbour? Definitely not, it was no comparison to the large harbour in Lübeck, but just a jetty.

His father's gruff voice tore him away from his thoughts about boats and jetties and harbours. 'Help unload the goods, son! I'm going to the customs house with the others in a moment, so come on! Shoo, shoo!'

Oh, how he hated the merchant's life! He would much rather live in a house and stay there. But no, he of all people had to be his father's only son, and his father had other plans for him. He was supposed to take over his business one day and had to learn everything he didn't want and never wanted. He took a box, but even while he was heaving it overboard, his father said, 'That's enough!' That was always the case, but he followed him as usual without contradiction in the direction in which the customs house was probably located.

When they stood in front of the customs house, a cold shiver ran down his spine. It looked so threatening and yet his father pulled him in his direction with a 'Come, Paris!' Inside, they were greeted by a medium-sized man with a grey full beard. He motioned for them to follow him and led them into a hall where he sat down behind a large table. He looked at them greedily. 'What goods do you want to sell in Brunswick?' the man asked directly. 'There are 150 lengths of fabric, 20 pelts...' And so, the father listed everything they had brought with them. He ended with 'eight porcelain jugs' and looked at the man. The man took his time with his answer and finally looked at his counterpart challengingly. 'That makes it 12 silver coins.' Paris' father quickly gave the man the 12 silver coins and pulled Paris outside. "We're going to the wool market," he said.

4.

It must have been very late when Begina stepped outside into the cool night air. She walked hastily over the cobblestones, wanting to get home as quickly as possible, into the warmth, even if she would find her father there.

When Begina finally arrived back at the small harbour on the Oker, she took out the small wooden note to examine it more closely. The note was about the size of her hand and made of smooth oak. When Begina squinted her eyes, she could see writing carved into the wood: 'Where the lion lives, the box in heaven reigns.' It sounded like a riddle! But before Begina could think about it any further, she bumped into a boy. 'Hey, watch it!' Begina muttered. She was about to walk on, but stopped when she saw that he also had a small wooden note in his hands. 'W...where did you get that?' Begina stammered. 'What? Oh, the note? I found it in the cemetery. Um, but you have one too... Do you know what you can do with it?'

The boy nervously stroked his shaggy brown hair with his fingers. He was about the same age as Begina and his face was covered with countless freckles. He was quite slight and wore a feather around his neck, attached to a long leather cord. 'No, I don't. I just found it too. My name is Begina, and you?' she replied. "I'm Paris," the boy answered, but he was interrupted: "Paris! Come on, we have to keep going!" a man's voice called from one of the many branching lanes of the harbour. "Uh, I have to go. Maybe I'll see you!" Paris called out before storming off into one of the many

lanes from which the voice had come.

Begina remained standing, confused. That was a short introduction. Damn, why did Paris run off so quickly? She would have liked to have learned more about the wooden notes! Were there more of them? Was Paris' note also written on? If so, what did it say?

5.

Paris let his eyes wander over the stalls of the wool market and doubted that he would ever leave here. His father, on the other hand, was thrilled by the many people buying fabrics. At some point, he got bored and snuck away. He ran into Kaiserstraße and turned right and then right again (so he could remember the way more easily) until he suddenly found himself in a cemetery.

Paris liked cemeteries because it was always so quiet and calm there. It felt so different from the constant noise on ships. There, the wind whistled and the calls of the men pierced the air. But in cemeteries, you could find this endless silence. Paris walked around some graves, when something wooden caught his eye at one of the graves. He bent down and picked it up. It was a small note. It was finely crafted and polished to the last detail. Paris slid it into his pocket. He didn't know what else to do with it.

Then he made his way back to the wool market. There his father was packing up the things.

'Where were you?', he shouted angrily at Paris. 'Um... well... I...', stuttered Paris. 'Well, never mind,' said Paris' father. These changes of mind were typical of him. After everything was stowed away, they set off. Paris could hardly keep pace with his father. Just as he tried to catch up, he bumped into a girl. 'Hey, watch it!' she muttered. Suddenly she stopped abruptly and asked in confusion, 'W...where did you get that?' 'What? Oh, the note? I found it in the cemetery. Um, but you have one too... Do you know what it does?' Paris asked nervously. The girl looked at him and replied, 'No, I don't. I just found it too. My name is Begina, and you?' 'I'm Paris,' Paris replied as his father interrupted him. He had already walked on and now called to him from a distance, 'Paris! Come on, we have to go!' Paris quickly excused himself with, 'Uh, I have to go. Maybe I'll see you!' and stormed after his father.

6.

'Stefan, wake up!' a childish voice called. Stefan jumped up from his dream and looked into the face of a little girl. He was a little sad that the dream was over so quickly, but he was happy to see Grete, as he was every morning. 'Thank you for waking me up, Grete,' he said, looking at her. She replied, 'My pleasure. I packed you some bread, so hurry up!' Stefan nodded and said goodbye, as he did every morning.

He ran off and looked back at Grete. The girl with the long reddish-brown curly hair waved at him. A smile spread across Stefan's face. Grete was a real help, and he really needed her. It was good to know she was around, as often as possible despite her work as a housemaid. He looked into his sack, which Grete had previously pressed into his hand. Inside were some bread and a heart-shaped piece of wood. Grete had been giving it to him every day since she found it.

Grinning, he rushed on. The faster he got to the Gewandhaus, the faster he would be back home with Grete. Stefan thought about his work; he was an apprentice to Faust, his master. Faust was a merchant of fabrics and Stefan helped him out when needed. He was not bad at that. Stefan looked around, now he was almost at the Gewandhaus and he only had to cross the old town market to get there. He hurried towards the house and opened the heavy iron door. There was not much going on in the house itself yet, so he went straight to Faust. He instructed him to go to the back chamber and sort the new delivery of fabric there so that it could be sold. Stefan let out an inward sigh and went to the back, where he dropped his sack into a wooden box. Then he let his gaze wander over the baskets full of fabric. All of them contained fabrics in different colours, which had been stuffed into the baskets in a messy manner.

Stefan pulled out a bundle and folded it up so that it took up less space. He placed it on the table

next to him and began to sort the fabrics by colour and type of fabric and fold them. He worked so quickly that he had finished the fabric delivery in a few hours and was able to eat his bread. But no sooner had he finished eating than the next large batch of fabric arrived, which he immediately started sorting too. This time it took him longer than expected, and when evening drew near, he still hadn't finished. However, he was only a few baskets of fabric away when Faust came in and inspected his work. Then he called out, 'That's very good. You're getting better! I have a job for you. Go to the harbour and pick up a bundle of cloth for me! After that, you can continue sorting.' Stefan nodded and put aside the red bundle of cloth he was holding. Then he ran down the stairs of the cloth hall and opened the blue, slightly shiny iron door.

7.

'Grete!? Mrs Adelheit is calling for you!' Marie, the cook, hurried off.

Grete hurried to get to her mistress. When she opened the door to Mrs Adelheit's chamber, the noble lady was standing in front of a tall mirror with her arms outstretched. Grete held her breath. She didn't know why. Was it the sight of herself? Or was it the fact that mirrors were so expensive? Grete was already lost in thought when a harsh voice brought her back to reality. 'Do you even listen to your mistress?' Mrs Adelheid turned her head as far as it would go, because she obviously had to stand still. Grete heard the voice of a thin man who scurried back and forth, taking measurements from Mrs Adelheid and showing her different fabrics. The tailor ran to one corner of the room and back again. Lady Adelheit pursed her lips and said, 'I want you to complete these tasks to my satisfaction by tonight!' 'Mistress, I wasn't listening carefully. Could you repeat the tasks again?' 'You weren't listening to me? As my maid, it is your job to listen to me, I am your mistress! I will teach you to listen later. Very well. First, however, you shall prepare supper with Marie. My dear husband is returning from a long journey.'

When Mrs Adelheid sat at the table with her husband, he told her about his journey.

'Imagine, I found a note made of wood.' – "But what use is a wooden note to you?" "I don't know, but there's something mysterious about it. It says something about a chest that she can open..." Grete didn't hear any more. Because a small, wooden object caught her eye. The wooden note was on a small stool.

If she stayed here, she would surely have to work until nightfall as punishment for her inattention. She wanted to get out. She wanted to meet Stefan and show him the note. She closed her hand around the piece of wood and left the house.

8.

Stefan set off. Across the old town market and into the darkness. Dusk had already set in and he was afraid that he would not return before dark. Grete would be worried. When Stefan saw the Oker shimmering in the darkness, he slowed down. It stank terribly, but he had to keep going to get the stuff. He walked through small alleys towards the harbour. From a distance, he could hear men shouting in the taverns. But he continued on and left the lively part of the shore. There were hardly any people here. At the very back, at the last docking point, was the warehouse where he had to go. Stefan continued on. Suddenly, he heard an eerie voice: 'Yes, you're right, Marik.' Stefan was startled, quickly took cover behind two barrels and listened. 'Yes. The chest is ours!' Stefan peeked out from behind the two barrels and looked at a barge that was moored nearby. Two men were standing on it. One of them, who must have been Marik, replied, 'I hope we find the chest in time, before someone else finds it!' 'Yes! Now we just have to find the rest of the wooden notes,' replied the other. He had an oil lamp, which Stefan saw. For a brief moment, he feared that its light might betray him, when a third, even rougher voice reached his ear: "How are we going to do that? How

are we going to find them?" – 'I don't know. But we mustn't let ourselves be beaten. Our old captain didn't die for nothing! We'll be rich. If only we knew where the other damn notes are.' "Here in Brunswick. We're very close," Marik murmured.

A cloud darkened the sky and a sense of foreboding spread through Stefan's stomach.

To be continued.

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