

## Preface

This is the continuation of the story of my first journey, which came about thanks to the help of various acquaintances. Unfortunately, due to the decrees of the Holy Church of God, I had to publish the first part anonymously and there are only a few copies of it.

Because of this, I am glad that I am now in exile and that no one can find me. This bundle of parchment contains some of my most vivid memories from a time when the world and I had not yet seen things that we now wish we had never seen.

## Prologue

*The water stretches to the horizon. A dark surface that makes mountains of white crests play around the bow of the ship. Sailors walk on the ship, but don't look up. People are blind to truths they don't want to see – of which I am one.*

*I am not one of them, and I am not sure what 'being' means to them and whether they would use that term to describe me. I don't care either way, because I am on the hunt. It is the deadly ghost that slips into people, like the thought of freedom, that drives the two people I actually want to be carried by.*

*The magnificent ship with the floe at the bow is drifting in front of me in the waves. The wind is warm, in the morning sun of the time they call summer. I always travel after the white sails. The sailors on the ship look up so proudly that they only see the hastily passing clouds, not me, while I look at them from up there – and at the same time I am right among them.*

*The girl, who is hiding on board, is still asleep among the rough sacks of the ship's hold; only her brother is awake. They don't know that I'm following them. They also don't know why they are special, why I have a reason to follow them.*

*To me, people are a mass, all the same, without stirring any feelings in me. I don't have feelings. But recently I have felt the hunting instinct for this girl who escaped from the city of seven towers – from her first fate, but not from me.*

*I am on board the clod ship. And if people really feel more than I do, then they should be afraid now.*

## Chapter 1

Antonia opened her eyes, but that didn't change the brightness. She struggled to her feet and promptly bumped her head. She rose with a groan and this time paid attention to the beams above her. As she crept to the hatch, she heard the sailors working on deck. She tried carefully to open the hatch, but it was too heavy.

'I have to find another way out,' thought Antonia. She groped around in the bulbous storage room and finally found her way back to the stairs. She tried again and this time it worked. She opened the hatch and climbed out. She emerged into a hive of activity and someone handed her a cloth and a bucket. 'Wipe!' came the harsh command from the mate, Daniel. She quickly bowed her head and set to scrubbing again, as she would at home.

During the day, Antonia tried to speak as little as possible and simply did as she was told. But towards evening, when the food was handed out, she had to join in the conversations so as not to attract attention, because of course most of the sailors knew each other. She listened carefully at first.

'There are supposed to be pirates in these waters!' said Thomas, the captain's experienced old friend.

'That's just a sailor's yarn!' shouted the blond youth, Valentin: 'The Hanseatic League has driven all pirates in and around the Baltic Sea or brought them to justice!'

'And what, you whippersnapper, about the Vitalienbrüder? Eh?! Stuke is still up to no good here and on the West Sea with impunity.'

'Well, ... they're not going to hijack the plaice, are they?'

The old man sighed. 'Let's just hope for the best, shall we?'

She was a little worried and tried to get to Jacob, who was talking to a very young sailor she recognised as Johannes.

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'We searched the entire hold. Apart from rats, there was nothing there. Are you sure you're all right?' 'Yes, yes, I'm fine,' Johannes replied, slightly annoyed, and turned away. Antonia thought of the hatch that couldn't be opened. When Johannes walked away, she went to her brother and said loudly, 'Merchant?' Jakob looked up. At first he seemed surprised, but quickly hid it behind a small smile: 'Emil! What is it?' he shouted, a little too loudly, then whispered, 'What is it, Antonia?'

'I wanted to talk to you about the crossing,' she whispered. "How long will it take until we get to London?"

'It'll take about three months,' Jacob replied, slightly annoyed. 'Please involve yourself more with the crew, otherwise Heinar will reconsider and throw you overboard! And try not to be so conspicuous when you want something from me.'

Antonia had stopped being surprised by her brother's mood swings years ago, although it had improved over the last three years. She hadn't seen him like this in a long time. A little offended, she went to the crew cabin and fell exhausted into her hammock.

The next morning, at the first blast of the morning watch, Antonia was woken by one of the sailors, she remembered his name was Arnold. 'Come on, get up, pigeon!' He said gently, gently shaking her arm. She grumbled, opened her eyes and swung her legs out of the hammock. Smiling contentedly, Arnold turned away and climbed up onto the deck. Sleepily, Antonia shuffled after him into the bright morning sun, which made her blink violently.

'Coming?' Arnold called.

After her eyes had adjusted to the bright light, she saw that almost all the sailors had gathered around a kind of table made of a wooden board placed on a barrel. The only ones not standing there were old Thomas and the captain. The latter was at the helm while Thomas nonchalantly operated the ropes and sheets. She curiously approached the men at the barrel.

'No, that can't be!' came from Valentin.

'Mill,' grinned his opponent Fabian, the helmsman, only. Paul, the ship's cook, was the first to notice her: "Hey, do you want to play too, Emil?"

Antonia thought about it, then said in her boy's voice, 'No thanks, I'd rather watch.'

'Understandable,' Paul replied and turned back to the table, where the game was just being changed. The nine men's morris board was replaced with dice cups. Walter and Rüdiger joined Valentin and Fabian. All shook their dice cups and slammed them with force on the lid of the water barrel. They looked at each other appraisingly and a few seconds passed, their hands still on their cups, but in the end all eyes rested on Valentin. He just looked back until he asked, 'What?'

'Go ahead!' the clearly more experienced players shouted in unison.

'Oh, sorry,' came the youngest at the table, 'Three ones.'

'Five ones,' Rüdiger murmured.

'Errr, two threes!' Fabian said, which earned him a disparaging look from Rüdiger.

Walter smiled softly and joined in: "Four threes."

Uncertain due to the unexpectedly massive increase, Valentin looked under his cup.

'Hm. Five threes?' he said.

'You have to say eight threes,' Thomas interjected, laughing.

'But I only have one!' came the reply, which was acknowledged with another unfriendly look from Rüdiger, but this changed to a smirk as he said quietly, "Liar."

There was a brief moment of silence as everyone raised their cups and looked at their dice.

'Ha!' Rüdiger, who was otherwise in a bad mood, shouted.

Valentin was obviously disappointed: "I'm bad at every game." He looked at Thomas, who was standing at the rope again grinning and corrected the course when Heinar gave the order, saying angrily, "This is all your fault!"

'My fault if you can't keep your mouth shut? I don't think so!' the old man replied, laughing.

'He can't shut up anyway,' Rüdiger murmured into his shaggy beard. Antonia was slowly beginning to develop an aversion to the scrawny, black-haired sailor. Meanwhile, another round of the game began and Paul turned to Antonia and asked, 'Do you want to know how it's played?'

'I get it. It's a game of deception. You bet with all the dice, not just your own,' she replied.

Paul nodded approvingly and said, "You're a clever lad, Emil," and turned back to the game.

That evening, a fire bowl was lit on deck. Paul spread porridge on rough wooden boards. Antonia shovelled it hungrily into herself. Johannes sat down between her and Jacob, although the two of them barely had any space between them.

'Allow me, Mr. Merchant?' he asked, grinning. Jacob just slid a bit closer to Heinar, smiling.

Antonia looked thoughtfully at the various faces on deck. She wondered what had led them all to give up their ordinary lives and become sailors.

As if on cue, Arnold addressed the group.

'We have a long and wild journey ahead of us,' he said. "We already know from Emil and Johannes why they are here, but there are some others who have not yet told us – Valentin, why do you hang around with hard-hearted fellows like us?"

The company laughed a little, while the young man seemed to sink a little deeper into his soup.

'I lived in Lübeck,' he said, and nothing more.

'And the reasons for leaving?' Arnold asked.

Valentin just looked back silently. He held the eye contact until the sailors' eyes turned away from him.

'I just wanted to get away,' he added after a few seconds.

'I can understand that,' said Rüdiger, but he sounded as if he were hiding another message behind it.

'Rüdiger? What brings you here?' asked Daniel.

Rüdiger sat up a little and looked around. "I ran away," he said simply, 'But this is my second trip.'

'We already know that,' said Paul, "But you only boarded the ship in Lübeck, so tell us again where you're from?"

'From Hamburg,' Rüdiger replied, slightly grumpy, "My parents were rich."

'So why did you run away?' asked Antonia, "At least then they had no reason to marry you off."

The sailors began to laugh.

'Why, were they going to sell you to someone? Was she at least a pretty girl?' Fabian asked, grinning. Antonia blushed a little.

'No, my sister,' she said quickly, "I just missed her."

'Don't be too weak, kid,' Paul replied, 'You'll learn to really miss women out here on the water. And now stop telling stories and drink, there's still rum in the cask.'

The sailors laughed and drank, while the water splashed black against the sides of the ship under the dark sky. When the night had enveloped the ship, as if in a cloak, the men began to sing:

'Hey oh, the lamp goes out  
but we defy the sea and wind

Stand together against the spray  
As long as we are drinking!

Flee from the waves  
And dance on the sea  
Before we smash on the rocks  
Pull on the rope  
Drown your sorrows  
Enclosed by cruel waves

Hey oh, the lamp goes out  
But we defy the sea and the wind  
Stand together against the spray  
as long as we drink!

The soul sinks  
happiness is lost  
farewell, dear friends at home  
farewell, dear ship  
we are destined  
to drown in the barrel, alone."

Antonia had heard the sailors sing something similar when they had entered the harbour. After the first few times the song was sung loudly, Antonia, Johannes and Jakob joined in. It wasn't the only song the sailors knew, and when the first stars appeared between the clouds, Antonia knew more songs than she could ever have learned in her entire life.

The next few days and weeks were much like the first, filled with gambling, scrubbing the deck, singing, and the boredom of the endless sea. There is only one noteworthy moment in this part of the story, two days before the port city of Nyborg. Antonia had volunteered to help Paul and Daniel in the small galley. The captain had ordered one of the last barrels of salted dried meat to be opened; a feast compared to the usual food. Now the watery soup that was usually served was being prepared to go with the meat.

While the mate was talking to the cook about the crew, Antonia chopped the turnips and threw them into the pot. If I don't get a decent meal in Nyborg, I can't take it anymore, she thought, I can't stand the sight of this soup anymore! When she had finally finished and saw that the two friends had almost forgotten to cut while talking, she tucked the knife unobtrusively into her shirt and scurried out of the room: 'I'm being called, I'll be right back!'

Daniel didn't even look at her as he called out to her as she ran away: 'But hurry!'

Antonia rolled her eyes and thought of her and Daniel's board of turnips, of which only one was finished.

'And he wants to tell me to hurry,' she grumbled sullenly when she arrived in the almost pitch-black storage room, where she stopped and took out the knife. She looked at it for a moment, then took off her sailor's cap. For the first time in a week, she felt her hair playing around her shoulders again. She sighed sadly as she slowly gathered her hair together, like a horse's tail.

She hesitated, but still placed the knife just below the roots and narrowed her eyes.

'Goodbye,' she whispered and cut.

When she opened her eyes again, she had most of her hair in her trembling hand. For a moment, Antonia just stared at her hair, then she pulled herself together, hid her hair in her shirt, and scurried back into the galley to the two gossips.

'Where have you been?' Daniel asked her angrily.

'Merchant Jacob wanted to speak with me,' she replied defiantly.

The mate just grumbled, "Fine. Then throw the rubbish overboard."

Antonia hoped that the two of them didn't notice her relief as she quickly made an annoyed face and grabbed the rubbish bin.

She stuffed her hair into the bucket and dashed up the stairs, almost falling over on her nose.

Once on the empty deck, she ran to the railing and hastily tipped everything overboard, making sure that all of her hair was delivered to the sea. She sighed and looked into the sunset.

'What are you doing?' Johannes stood next to her, leaned on the railing and looked her in the eye.

'Oh,' she stammered, "nothing special. But I cut my hair."

She took off her sailor cap and showed her best friend the result. He looked at her confusedly, but smiled after a while.

'It's probably better this way,' he said, "It's less conspicuous. Now Valentin looks more like a girl than you do! But you should cut it even more at the sides sometime."

They both laughed to themselves, but then became serious again. He looked at her and said, "But it looks good," and blushed bright red.

Now she looked confused: 'Thank you?'

She shook herself briefly and then said, 'I won't go back. So I won't keep anything in memory either!'

With these words, she swung the cap and threw it high into the wide Baltic Sea.

'So!' she smiled at Johannes.

'You could have just given it back to me,' Jacob's voice sounded behind them from the aft castle.

*It is a wild and cold journey on the ship. White spray splashes against the railing and deep, dark water splashes against the wall of the ship's belly. A splashing that envelops the sailors at night like wet cloths that could cover them on their deathbed. The ship could lose its footing on the treacherous waves and sink into the depths. It is a dangerous life on the water. However, no seafarer knows what real danger they are in.*

*I am on the right path. The grey city lies at the end of this journey; I just have to let myself be carried by them. The sea does not seem hungry. It just slurps with relish, without swallowing the ship of clouds. But I cannot get close to the girl and her brother. They escape me. At close range, they ignore me as if I did not exist.*

*The crew only know of the dangers of the water. It is a dangerous journey, but there is more skill in people than I believed. They steer the ship through the waves, ever onwards towards their goal, although the land disappears in the wind and weather when the wind blows harder, and blows the trail to the brown city with its seven towers. It may well be that they can do this better than others. I admire that. Admire. That's one of the words they use for feelings. But that's not me. I can only think, observe and kill. If I have feelings, they are only a mirror of what I see.*

*But I understand people better when I travel with them. Before, I didn't even think that they were enough in themselves to understand. They are always in one place, while I am always far away and at the same time close, from many places, almost everywhere. They try to travel, to escape, from so many things. But people don't seem to escape me.*

*The girl is so close. She sometimes touches me as if it were not difficult for her, but I do not touch her. She looks me in the eye and speaks to me without sensing my presence. Ignorance is something else that humans are very good at. I want her to feel me, to find me.*

*I hear what they say, but no one speaks to ME, no one looks at ME. Because I am invisible. And I AM. I will also be there for them.*

*I watch them day after day. People can steer a ship across a distance that is as soft as air. They guide the ship through the fog, through the wind, all together, even though they are not a single*

*being. I am in many bodies, unbound and powerful. And yet they cannot see me. They see the sun even when it is hidden behind the clouds. There must be a way for them to discover me too. For that girl to notice me and look at me once when she speaks, so that I may finally reach my goal. The grey city. The destination of this journey. Until then, she will at least be able to sense me. One day, people will stop looking up at the sky and start looking at what's creeping around them.*

## Chapter 2

Antonia looked at the nearby land, at the gently sloping coastline and the flat land beyond. She pulled with all her might on the damp, rough rope, jerk by jerk, letting it fall through her hands to the back. Behind her, Daniel shouted some orders to the sailors on the other side. Rüdiger and Arnold pulled the same rope as Antonia. Thomas operated the sheets, the large rope that brought the yards into position. The others got ready to tie down the lowered sail while the bow pointed north and the ship resumed its course. Two sailors were still up on the yards.

'Ahoy, Nyborg!' Johannes shouted across the bay where they had stocked up on supplies. Antonia gasped and leaned on the railing as soon as she let go of the rope. The ship creaked and swayed as the strong sea winds that awaited them on the open sea took hold of it. The journey continued. 'Ahoy!' she said weakly, but she pulled herself up again after a short time.

'Well, giving way already, land salad?' asked Thomas, who came over to them. 'Seems like you'll make it to London after all, though I had my doubts at first.'

Antonia just grinned and stuck her nose into the wind. She had grown accustomed to the rough banter of the sailors. Her strength had grown since the beginning of the journey, but she was still the quickest to become exhausted. She tried to imitate the tone of voice, just as she had grown accustomed to being Emil. Better than Johannes and Jacob. The two young men stuttered almost every time they tried to talk to the youngest crew member.

The only one who still seemed unsettled by the rough seafarers was Valentin. He was usually with Fabian, the helmsman, with whom he was now good friends, and seemed rather shy in his conversations with the rest of the crew.

'The wind has picked up,' Thomas said to no one in particular, "But we still have a few weeks before we reach the Skagerrak."

'What is the Skagerrak anyway?' Johannes asked curiously.

Thomas grumbled. 'Rough area. Around Cape Skagen, the water is always churned up and the waves are high as mountains, no seafarer likes to go through it. But you still have to. Countless times. And the creatures of the sea will chase you down there into the icy depths if they can. Just wait, you'll see.'

'Stop scaring them. They'll see for themselves,' Paul called out, who was crouching next to them to clear the ropes out of the way. Thomas just grumbled.

Antonia listened eagerly to the old sailor, but still looked questioningly at Arnold, who was standing behind Thomas. He was usually much easier to understand. When Thomas told his incomparable stories, no one could distinguish between truth and tall tales, but Arnold was more understanding of their limited knowledge of the sea.

'Around Cape Skagen, the northernmost point of land, the seas meet,' explained the brown-haired sailor with the long braid, 'the Western Sea, which lies on the other side, and the Baltic Sea, which we are currently sailing on and which also includes Lübeck, your seven-towered city. It's stormy there. We'll reach it fairly soon, so it's better if you prepare yourselves for us running into a few storms. When the time comes, you'll enjoy it.'

'You slackers! Get back to the ropes,' Daniel shouted, "We're doing a jibe! Or do you want us to smash on the rocks?"

The sailors groaned and went to work for the next manoeuvre. Valentin, who had apparently been

listening, came over to Arnold.

'What is Cape Skagen?' he asked curiously. Arnold just shook his head kindly. The manoeuvre required haste.

'Surely nothing worse than your constant chatter,' Rüdiger murmured before running back to his post at the stern.

'A place you definitely won't like,' Thomas replied, "Now go on, your place is over there!"

Thomas pointed to one of the ropes leading from the railing to the mast. Valentin seemed to want to protest, but changed his mind and went to work with a stern expression on his face.

It was noon, just before the first blast of the afternoon watch. They had been underway from Nyborg for two days. The sky was dark. Thomas's warning had come true: the weather had grown steadily worse over the last two days and the sea rougher. The Plaiice had reached a landmark for the umpteenth time, where the older sailors fell silent and began to tell dire warnings and stories of the black, deep water and howling storms. Their words suggested that the storms on the open sea were like facing death itself, worse than the Black Death, the plague that raged on land.

Antonia began to feel the tension that was gripping the entire crew. Valentin, Johannes and even Jacob began to defer to Thomas and the others and absorb their advice. The storms suddenly didn't seem like a funny story anymore.

Antonia climbed up to Fabian and Valentin on the aft castle. Fabian was leaning against the rudder, talking animatedly to the young sailor sitting next to him on a rope roll.

'Is there something?' Fabian asked Antonia as she climbed the stairs, fighting against the salty wind.

'I just want to see the waves better,' Antonia replied, fixing her gaze earnestly on the horizon. If the experienced sailors were worried, she could only guess what really awaited them at Cape Skagen. She was afraid, she realised now. In the face of these dangers, marriage, the plague and all the things she wanted to leave behind in Lübeck no longer seemed so bad. But there was no going back, and it was foolish to wish for it.

'A- Emill!' Johannes called from below, bringing Antonia back to the present. She climbed down from the aft castle and held her arm in front of her face to keep the salty spray from hitting her. The wind blew hard and sharp across the deck and the ship swayed.

Valentin followed her onto the forecastle. He held on to the railing anxiously and tried to push his hair out of his face. It reached just to his ears, and was just short enough that he couldn't tuck it behind his ears.

'Is that the storm already?' Valentin asked quietly, but the other sailors didn't answer.

'There you are,' said Johannes. He smiled, but looked around anxiously.

'Do you think this is the first storm?' Antonia asked, glancing at Valentin, who was just clinging to the planks and staring stiffly at the horizon. Daniel started to laugh, but didn't finish. He seemed a bit grumpy. She didn't dare ask him anything else.

The cabin door opened and immediately slammed against the wall. Arnold, who was already standing next to the door, waiting, calmly glancing back and forth between the crew members, struggled to prevent her from swinging back immediately and pushed her against the wall.

Thomas, Hainar and Jakob hastily stepped out of the cabin into the loud wind before Arnold slammed the door shut and locked it again.

'We're steering further north to get into the gap between the storm fronts,' Hainar said loudly to Daniel so that the rest of the crew could hear it too. "The sail has to be hoisted. It's going to be rough weather, comrades!"

He turned to the three teenagers with a hardened grin. 'Get ready for your baptism at sea!'

'Fabian!' Daniel shouted across the deck so that it could be heard through the howling wind, "Five degrees north!"

'Can't we go anywhere but through the storm?' asked Valentin timidly. He obviously still couldn't

see much, except for his hair.

Thomas just laughed and slapped him on the shoulder, which almost made Valentin fall to the ground.

'Landlubber,' he said seriously, and without another word went to the oars. Arnold smiled at the boy and climbed up to them.

'If the water gets any wilder, tie yourselves to the ship!' he said encouragingly, but clearly, 'we don't want you to become fish food. Listen to what Hainar and Daniel say, it could save your lives. And if the worst comes to the worst, you can say a prayer better than any of us. The long journey has already driven the holiness out of us. So stop shaking!'

'Very encouraging,' Antonia blurted out, while the wind tried to make her untidy hair even more matted. Johannes looked at her helplessly and remained silent. Arnold just nodded, went down from the fort to his brother at the wheel and exchanged a few brief sentences with him.

'Valentin should drown, then it will finally be a bit quieter and no one will ask stupid questions,' said Rüdiger with a grin, and stumbled a moment later as a wave broke on the ship's side. The crew was completely soaked. Antonia and Johannes held on to each other for a moment until the wave drained through the gaps in the railing.

'There's no time for comments like that!' said Jakob sharply, who had suddenly appeared on the fort. He looked strangely unhappy. For the first time in weeks, Antonia realised that, just like her, Jakob had been a child just a few weeks ago, who didn't want to be a merchant, just as she didn't want to get married. She thought back to the small family with a surge of homesickness. What had Mia said, who hadn't wanted her two siblings to go anywhere, like the siblings who had already died? Even their father had shown clear signs of love from time to time, and was probably worried about where she was, and Ava, who had taken care of her like a mother, was probably the most worried. She thought of the warm hallway with her hiding place under the floor where she had found the letters from her grandmother that had driven her to London. Antonia suddenly realised that just these few weeks had changed her, Jakob and Johannes as much as only years could have done. But still, they were just children.

Jakob came over to them and smiled at them openly for the first time, as if he had suddenly thrown off the mask he had been wearing the whole time to convincingly play the role of the merchant.

'I didn't expect you to be a part of this,' he said quietly to Antonia. "You deserve to be sailing along on this. You really are like a boy now, Antonia. Even if you always have been, really."

'My name is Emil,' she replied after a moment's hesitation, 'and Father would hate me.'

'I know,' grumbled Jacob, "it wouldn't be any more peaceful at home. But anyway, now it's no longer important whether someone would regret sending us away. If we drown now, we drown. And I wanted to be a sailor."

'That's nice,' Antonia said, sarcastic. But she couldn't help it; she was glad that Jakob was finally talking to her again, as if he were her brother. It was probably even more difficult for him to play a role for weeks that he wasn't entirely happy with. Johannes was the only one who could be completely himself on this ship.

'I'm glad I escaped that man in the green coat,' Antonia said softly.

'My parents trust me to take care of myself,' said Johannes thoughtfully. "I was just one more mouth to feed." Which way are we going now?

'North, and then into the storm,' said Jakob, not very enthusiastic. 'The storm is raging harder on the coast, so we have to stay on the open sea. I hate being an adult.'

After a brief moment of silence, Jakob walked away as if he had never spoken to them. Valentin, who had been standing nearby for a while, looked after him helplessly. Antonia just shook her head to get rid of the thoughts and pinched Johannes' arm.

'Don't be a coward,' she said grinning. "You know all about danger, at least that's what you said about archery."

'Same here!' he said indignantly. "Ouch! You dog!"



Johannes's repertoire of swearwords had already grown by a few foreign expressions during the voyage.

'Pig's head,' Antonia replied.

'Devil's hell-skin,' Johannes murmured, then laughed anyway, until the next wave drowned out his laughter.

'All hands to the ropes! Braid the yards!' Hainar shouted almost directly behind them. The young people jumped and ran.

Daniel and Hainar kept the crew busy for an indefinite period, while the sea tossed the ship back and forth like a small, helpless animal. The sail billowed out wider than ever before, pulling so hard on the ropes that the whole ship creaked like a monster from the depths of the sea. When the cloth had been retracted a bit and the yards retracted, the ship lost speed, but Antonia thought that it had become even more of a toy of the waves. It no longer propelled itself, but was helplessly tossed back and forth. Even the rudder had lost its power.

Where is the land? Antonia wondered, hanging on to a rope as the next wave tilted the ship to one side. The waves made the sea look like a mountain range with jagged peaks, as if torn apart by divine forces. Normally the ship floated above it, but now the bow split walls of water that wanted to tear the ship apart.

'Tie yourselves on and hold on!' Daniel shouted, having tied himself to the masthead ascent.

Antonia tried to reach one of the loose ropes, but she slipped across the deck and almost fell over the railing. She just managed to hold on to the planks. The wind pushed the ship to one side and Antonia also crawled along the railing for a moment, as if it were the railing, while she hastily tied a rope to her belt and looked anxiously at the chaos.

'Johannes?' she shouted through the storm, and felt the wind tear the words from her mouth, "Jakob?"

She saw Valentin, who was holding on to the mast, looking towards the stern, which had now become a sea of its own. He let go of the safe wood, took a step and immediately fell. A wave washed into Antonia's eyes. When she was able to open her eyes again and had stopped coughing, Valentin had grabbed Johannes and the two of them fought their way back to the mast, where they helped each other tighten their ropes.

'Emil! Get back to the middle of the boat!' someone shouted, Antonia couldn't see who gave the order. Shortly afterwards, Hainar held out a hand from above, which she took so he could pull her back onto the deck.

'You just have to wait it out!' he shouted, still sounding surprisingly cheerful, "The storm will pass, that is, if you survive it! Don't worry!"

With that, Hainar crawled back to the stern castle, where she could vaguely make out the silhouettes of Arnold and Fabian. The two brothers were apparently turning the wheel with difficulty, over which they had lost control.

Paul, Thomas and Daniel were standing on the bow castle, Jakob, Rüdiger and Walter were nowhere to be seen. The cabin door was closed, but not locked from the outside.

The wind changed direction for a moment. The ship suddenly straightened up and swayed in the other direction. For a brief moment, as the ship rode on the crest of a wave, Antonia's gaze reached almost to the horizon. The entire black sea was a mountain range, the mountains of which were dancing passionately and powerfully. Only the ship was not part of this dance. It was jostled by them as in a port bar brawl.

The next moment, a wave broke against the side of the ship and a mountain of water blocked Antonia's view. She clung to the two boys, who returned her grip.

Valentin opened his mouth as if to say something, but Antonia couldn't understand him. The wind tore all sound from their ears. Before she could ask Valentin to speak up, she heard something else from the bow cabin.

'Hej ho, the lamp goes out!' it sounded indistinctly, howling through the storm. She closed her eyes for a moment, then she realised that it was Thomas and Paul who, shouting at the storm, had started a sea shanty.

'Hej oh, the lamp goes out  
but we brave the sea and wind  
stand together, against the spray  
as long as we are alive!"

Antonia listened for a while, confused that the lyrics of the song she knew had suddenly changed. She heard how the wind threatened to tear the words from the men's lips again. But they sang even louder, although their shouting could not really be called singing. Soon the crew on the stern castle joined in, until they could be clearly understood.

"Flee from the waves  
and dance on the sea  
before we smash on the rocks  
pull on the rope  
your suffering will suffocate  
surrounded by cruel waves

Hey oh, the lamp goes out  
but we defy the sea and the wind  
stand together against the spray  
as long as we are alive!

The ship sinks  
luck is lost  
farewell, dear friends at home  
farewell, dear ship  
we are destined  
to drown at sea, alone."

After the first verse, Antonia and Johannes began to sing along almost simultaneously. They couldn't hear whether Valentin did the same. After a while, they felt that they were finally drowning out the storm. She suddenly began to grin and, like the other sailors, to sing louder and louder against the storm that enveloped them in grey fog. Rüdiger had reappeared on the forecastle. 'Where's Jacob?' Antonia asked loudly after a while, because she suddenly felt a strange sense of responsibility for her brother, who had not yet reappeared in her line of sight. Johannes also looked a little worried.

'He has to take care of himself!' Valentin shouted. "I don't think that knowing how to swim is going to help him here!"

'Look up,' Johannes suddenly said dryly.

Antonia looked at him in confusion for a moment, then followed his gaze up into the rigging. Her brother was holding on to the ladder to the crow's nest, occasionally making unidentifiable gestures in the direction of the stern castle while he pressed himself against the ropes and held on tight when a wave washed around him.

'He's insane,' she said, but grinned broadly as she realised that Jakob was enjoying the storm.

The waves smoothed again from the mountains to the hills, as the grey shore came into view on

the horizon, blurred in the rain and veiled in spray. They had not lost any crew members. Antonia felt strangely stronger than before, as if she had grown up a little. She was surprised to find that Valentin seemed quite cheerful again when the wind allowed them to talk.

'Look!' the young sailor called out, pointing to the horizon in the east.

The crew, most of whom had gathered on the main deck, turned to face the open sea. A ship, blackened by the rain, was sinking at high speed on the horizon. It left no trace on the water surface. Antonia wasn't even sure she had seen it, but apparently she wasn't the only one.

'A sea full of eerie apparitions,' Arnold murmured into his beard.

'It just sank,' Antonia replied.

'He saw it,' Walter answered grumpily.

'Who else saw it besides me?' Arnold asked. Almost half the crew raised their hands.

'We don't want to help?' Antonia asked.

Hainar joined the astonished sailors and looked at them. 'Help who?' he asked. Valentin, Antonia and Fabian tried to explain what they had seen at the same time, but Hainar had understood quickly.

'There doesn't seem to be anything there. No shipwrecked people, no flotsam,' he determined with a scrutinising look, 'The spray just tricked you.'

'I'll get the telescope,' said Jacob and disappeared into the cabin.

'Or it was a ghost ship,' said Fabian. "We've seen something like that before off Bruges."

'I'd like to see that up close,' said Johannes.

'You don't want to, landlubber,' Thomas replied. "You can't joke with the ship's kobold. And you can't joke with the other ghosts that are hanging around in our presence."

'You could at least try,' Antonia replied, grinning weakly, and quickly made off in case she had annoyed Thomas.

*In one place the waves dance, in another the fire plays. In an almost destroyed body, one of thousands. A person, a woman, who freezes in the middle of her movements. The form, which I usually recognise in human faces, is deformed, her features are distorted.*

*Her face is reflected in the eyes of her counterpart, as in black water, in which rats cavort. The man grabs the woman and shakes her body. Stares at her, stares into her eyes. I wait behind them. But they don't see me any better than the eyes of the sailors. The eyes of humans don't seem much better than the water in the harbour basin, they can't see the essentials.*

*I cannot enter them without destroying them. The woman's body is as if it were filled with fire, but the heat flees. The pain in the eyes of the person opposite is different, but just as strong. People can suffer not only with their bodies. I am still not sorry. But now I know. I have a way to achieve my goal. I have been content for long enough with sending out my messengers and placing myself in all the world. But now I will force them to see me. Even if more bodies have to burn and wither like torches.*

*I can travel as far as I want, but not through time. At least I've never done it before. But memories let you relive everything, sometimes more helplessly than before, because you can't change anything anymore. Even though I was never helpless. I can remember, and I remember. Fire has burned before without my doing it. From a pile of wood high up into the sky, around one of them. How long ago it was and why people did it has no meaning for me. But I remember the look in the woman's eyes when she burned.*

*Was it because of me? I don't understand people, so I don't know. I hovered at the edge of the grey square, the grey streets and houses. I have been there before, and it is knowledge from another life, but since I am not alive, it has no meaning for me.*

*One last look fell through the flames – it was directed at me and targeted, unlike the looks of the others. She didn't look up, but straight ahead. Into the eyes that I don't have. The looks through the*

*heat of the fire were for me. But no one has been able to solve the mystery. The flames have spread to her. Something I couldn't do.*  
*People sometimes burn those they would have protected from me.*

### Chapter 3

Antonia was sleeping peacefully in her hammock when the ship's cat woke her uncomfortably. When she ignored the cat, it slapped her roughly in the face. Antonia, who had never had much to do with the cat before, didn't understand its agitated behaviour. And yet she had a bad feeling.

She listened into the silence. Apart from the gentle lapping of the water, the ship seemed to be lying still in the water.

When Antonia got up and went on deck, only Fabian at the helm and Jacob at the bowcastle were standing.

Yawning, she strolled over to her brother, who was gazing into the sunrise.

'Well?' she asked.

'What do you mean, well?' he replied absentmindedly.

Antonia shrugged. 'I don't know. How are you?'

'I'm fine, I guess. I don't have to do as much work as Fabian when it comes to sailing.'

'Hm.'

Both fell silent and stared into the distance.

'Look, a ship,' said Jakob tonelessly.

'Mmm.'

'It's coming closer.'

'Great.'

Jakob suddenly sat up a little straighter and frowned.

'What is it?' asked Antonia.

'It has black sails...'

'And?'

His eyes widened in fright.

'...and the sign of the Brethren Vitali on it!' he exclaimed, and turned hastily toward the hatch.

'What or who are the Brethren Vitali?' asked Antonia, who was now also feeling a little worried.

Jakob quickly went to the helm, where Fabian was still standing, and said, 'My father taught me: the Brethren Vitali are a group of buccaneers who carry out organised attacks all over the Baltic and North Seas and then share the loot fairly among themselves.'

When he arrived at the helm, he addressed the helmsman, 'Take us away from these pirates!'

Fabian looked out to sea and showed a slight sign of fear: 'Sir, with all due respect, we need the whole crew for that!'

Jakob nodded at his sister, who immediately dashed into the hold.

'Pirates!' she shouted loudly. Most of the crew members were startled out of their slumber.

'Wake up, you sleepyheads!' Heinar's voice boomed through the ship's hold: "Get ready to fight for your lives. Go, go, go!"

Now everyone was finally awake and stumbled up the stairs to the deck, still drunk with tiredness.

'You too, Emil,' the captain wheezed, 'we need every man we can get.'

Antonia nodded curtly and hurried up on deck as well.

The gusts were now getting stronger and the wind was becoming more piercing. To make matters worse, a few drops of rain began to fall from the sky.

In a flurry of excitement, the crew set about turning the ship around. They wanted to flee, but it was too late. The pirates were already too close.

'Prepare for battle!' the captain shouted.

Antonia rushed to the bow castle and peered over the railing. They had abandoned the manoeuvre, and she had a good view of the other ship. The figures on the second ship spread out like a mirror of the crew on the Planke.

Valentin was called by Daniel to the lower deck, to the other sword-bearers. Antonia exchanged an excited glance with Johannes. Her arms trembled slightly, as if she had already fired a few shots. Johannes stared intently ahead, while Rüdiger on the other side just played with his bow, tugging at the loose bowstring.

On the aft castle of the Scholle, Thomas and Walter also took out their arrows and laid the first one on, ready for the first salvo.

On deck, steel was drawn, ready to cut flesh.

The buccaneers shouted insults and threats at them in a language unknown to Antonia. But words were not the only thing flying in their direction: iron hooks with ropes at their end caught on the railing and rigging.

'Wait!' Thomas shouted. He, Walter and Rüdiger had already drawn back their bows. Antonia and Johannes hurriedly followed suit.

Antonia's breathing was shallow and rapid. Remember *this! You're good at archery!*

She felt the cold in her fingers as she pulled back the bowstring.

She felt the water in her face and hair, raining down on her.

She felt her heart racing. Was that because of fear or excitement?

The pirates were drawing closer and closer, even though the sailors armed with swords were cutting the ropes.

Then the two vessels were lying rail to rail and the buccaneers leaped like rabbits onto the plank.

'Fire!' Thomas shouted and the marksmen let their strings sing.

The arrows whistled through the air, but the pirates seemed to be well versed in dealing with such fire, as they deftly dodged all the arrows.

Relentlessly and with a roar, the sailors now threw themselves at the intruders, and the clanking of metal on metal and the dull thud of swords hitting wood could already be heard.

The archers on the castles kept taking aim, but thanks to the wild melee, it was difficult to get a clear shot at the pirates, as their own allies were constantly in the way. The weather wasn't helpful either. The drizzle made the bowstrings and planks slippery, so that the fight became a difficult undertaking for everyone involved.

Rüdiger, Thomas, Johannes and Walter kept shooting despite everything, while Antonia hesitated. *I can't kill anyone!* she thought.

She had seen the arrow she had fired miss the neck of one of the buccaneers by a hair's breadth and fly into the grey sea behind him.

Slowly, Antonia lowered her bow.

Suddenly, one of the pirates appeared on the small staircase leading to the forecastle. The short sword in his hand, this coarse-looking sailor was puffing up the steps, but was met by Johannes' shoulder, which he rammed into the man's chest. The man staggered back, caught off-guard by the force of the blow, and flailed his arms wildly to prevent himself from falling. His hands found Antonia's doublet and pulled her down onto the deck with him.

She landed softly on the buccaneer, who hit his head hard on the deck and never opened his eyes again.

She remained in position for a split second, then crawled away in panic and ducked behind some barrels. Although the crew of the Scholle was better trained, the pirates had now gained the upper hand in the melee and were pushing their opponents to the opposite railing.

Two of the brothers of mercy remained with arrows in their bodies, while the water on the planks around them took on a pinkish hue.

Each of the honourable sailors fought fiercely, each against at least two pirates.

Arnold and Fabian flashed their steel and defended themselves as one man with four arms, inflicting painful cuts over and over again.

Valentin had taken a blow, limping on his left leg, and defending himself poorly. It seemed to take effort for him to raise his sword fast enough to avoid being chopped into small cubes.

Suddenly someone was standing over Antonia and yanking her up by one arm. She gasped and tried to fight him off, but his grip was harder than granite.

She looked up into a weather-beaten face, grinning at her with crooked yellow teeth.

'Hello, lad,' croaked the man.

When she looked back at the fortifications, she saw with horror that there were five pirates on each, threatening the archers with their blades.

'You'll be very useful to us, lad!' cooed the pirate who had seized her and was dragging her relentlessly towards the fight.

'So!' the buccaneer roared, 'Everyone, listen up!'

Strangely enough, everyone stopped, the crew of the floe as well as the pirates, and some turned around, but they didn't lower their weapons an inch.

The older pirate, who seemed to be the ringleader, smacked his lips disgustingly, then grunted across the deck: 'If you continue fighting, your archers and the little one here will die.' He roughly shook Antonia, who tried not to make a sound: 'Unless you don't care about that, then we'll kill them all together and you can happily continue fighting and also die. We get what we want either way. Your choice, landlubbers!'

There was a dead silence, the drizzle slowly stopped.

The pirate captain thought to himself, *always this long wait. I hate waiting. Who knows when I'll suddenly drop dead!*

'Get on with it!' he barked, 'If not, - What the...'

Surprisingly, he let go of Antonia's arm so that she fell to the ground, and jumped backwards.

"Mau!"

It was the cat. It had nestled against the buccaneer's legs as if they were those of an old friend and now sat happily meowing in front of them.

*Dastardly beast!* thought Antonia.

*I hate cats!* thought the captain, whose name was Morlec.

*Fish!* thought the cat.

'Damn animal!' the buccaneer shrieked and kicked at the cat, while keeping a cautious distance.

The cat hissed and arched its back, while its fur stood on end.

'Be gone, you!'

Morlec thought of the accident with the stray cats when he had lived in Novgorod as a child.

The cat hissed even more and jumped up on the captain's leg, digging its claws into his flesh, while he tried, screaming and cursing, to get rid of the furry bundle, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

While friend and foe were still chuckling and Antonia was fascinated by the orange bundle of energy, Heinar shouted, 'Now!'

Suddenly, he, Daniel and Jacob swung their swords like demons and hacked a path through the distracted pirates, breaking through the ring. At the same time, Thomas pushed one of the pirates on the aft castle overboard and began to defend himself with his fists against the others.

Rüdiger, on the other hand, used nasty kicks and pointed elbows to send first one, then two, and then three of the pirates groaning to the ground.

The cat had meanwhile left the screaming captain and jumped from one buccaneer to the other, hissing and scratching furiously.

Jakob came to a halt in front of Antonia and offered her his left hand to help her up.

She grabbed it and pulled herself up.

Slowly but surely, the crew of the floe regained their footing.

The pirates were pushed back by the wild attacks of the crew and the chaos caused by the cat. Meanwhile, there were already eight bodies lying on the deck, without moving much, including Valentin.

'Retreat!' shouted Da Morlec, 'Everyone back to the ship! It's not worth the loot!'

The pirates now retreated more quickly and hardly attacked at all. Finally, they all climbed back aboard.

Only one pirate remained behind, still desperately wrestling with the ship's cat. One of the pirates began to call to him, 'Alfred, Alfred, come back!' Alfred was hard of hearing and only reacted to the third call, much to the amusement of the crew. He too made his way towards his colleagues, still with the cat on his neck. The cat was hanging from his back and scratching his shoulders badly. Now he had almost reached the railing. Antonia was frightened. The cat was still hanging on Alfred and didn't notice that she was almost taken away.

Antonia ran and yanked the cat, who was not very pleased about it, from his maltreated back.

'Thank God!' she heard the pirate captain's voice, 'Imagine if that beast had come with us!'

The hooks that had gripped the ship like claws were released in no time, while a few more arrows flew over.

A casting-off manoeuvre was quickly carried out and the pirates were gone.

Everyone was sitting on deck, panting. The battle was over, the deck was in complete chaos and the cat was a hero.

'Hey! No napping on deck!' Rüdiger shouted from the stairs to the bow castle at Valentin, who was half-leaning against the side of the ship on the floor, an almost sadistic grin on his face. He had suffered more serious wounds than the others: a deep cut on his leg and a stab wound in his forearm.

Valentin just groaned, 'Yeah, right...'

Paul quickly took care of the wounds and provided everyone with bandages and food, with the captain's permission.

The cat quickly calmed down again, wriggled out of Antonia's grip and began to stroke the crew's legs.

'A cat saved us. I can't believe I'm saying this!' Said Thomas.

The others murmured in agreement. He took a deep breath: 'Okay guys, does anyone have any name suggestions?'

Everyone shouted in confusion: 'Flash!' Said Rüdiger, while 'Orange!' Was Fabian's suggestion.

'Karlchen!' Said Arnold. 'Jackie,' Johannes said, and Valentin wanted to call the animal 'Pirate Destroyer 3000.'

In the end, they agreed on Karl.

Slowly the sun came out and the first rays of sunshine were reflected in the water. There was no more sleep in the air, everyone was far too excited.

'Set sail,' Heinar ordered and turned to leave.

'Sir?'

'Yes, Walter?'

'What do we do with the... defeated buccaneers?'

There was a brief silence, then the captain replied coldly and without turning around: 'Throw them to the fish. They have caused us enough trouble and we need to arrive in London as soon as possible.'

*There it is again: a glance that passes me by. Before it closes. There have certainly been a thousand glances already. None of them see me. They can see the suffering and the pain, but that is all they notice.*

*The ship's crew have come and gone like fleas. How fitting, since the seafarers call them vermin anyway. It is the vermin that is supposed to help me, but not here. I'm already on board. If they had stopped anyone here, it would have been me. And whoever stops me will be used as an opportunity to get ahead.*

*The rain makes strange melodies, indistinguishable from the waves beating against the wooden walls of this ship from the outside. Such a small, weak vehicle in the vastness of nature. People overestimate themselves when they believe they are stronger than this world. They are not stronger than nature and they are not stronger than me.*

*Body and body are lying against each other. I am floating in the midst of them. I have not yet understood whether people do it out of fear, out of stupidity, or because they all have the same soul that desires unity. After all, they are always looking for groups. A stupid idea that it would make them stronger.*

*I feel their hearts beating, their veins flooded with life force. Life will have to make way for me once I've settled in. A breath flows through the body below me and takes me in as if I were a gift. And I find myself in a place more in this world.*

*The girl, who I can now see much better, is lying next to me, eyes closed. You can see differently through people's eyes than through mine. I can see every hair curling around her forehead and every pore on her skin.*

*She can't see me or feel me. She will never feel me because there is a wall between us. But people can feel pain through grief, and I have seen that she can too. The body I'm in is the closest thing to her. She will still feel pain, through the other beings connected to her soul, bit by bit. Until she looks me in the eye and realises what I am. I'm not bound by feelings, and so it will be humans who lose in the end.*

*The water continues to beat against the outer wall of the ship, while the fire takes its course.*

## **Chapter 4**

The last week of the voyage was cold. Most of the time, a fine drizzle fell from the sky, mixing with the spray and the wind. Antonia occasionally almost gave in to the temptation to avoid the cold work in the hold. But after a few days she accepted the rain as part of the sea, which soaked her every day on this journey anyway. The sea was a different colour than before. The grey and black turned more and more into a deep blue. At night it was warmer because the cabin was heated, but on this part of the journey the hard sailors longed most for the warmth of a house.

Antonia woke up and it took her a while to realise that she was so stiff because she was freezing. The cold had seeped into her limbs while she slept and sapped her strength. Shivering, she sat up and almost fell out of the hammock. Even the blankets had begun to absorb the moisture.

Johannes was still sleeping restlessly, while the rest of the crew were already waiting on the deck and stamping to keep warm. Arnold and Rüdiger were working on the sail, and Valentin seemed to be working on the bow castle. Antonia suspected that it was one of the damages the ship had suffered in battle. They hadn't repaired everything in the last port, only what they needed to make it to London.

*The cold stands like a hundred-mile-wide block on the water. But cold is not my enemy, it is theirs. It makes them weak enough to strike. It is the right day and the right hour.*

Antonia joined him, helping by holding the boards Valentin nailed to the railing. Just before the next watch was due to blow, Valentin raised his head and wiped the moisture from the waves and spray from his face.

'Can you wake Johannes?' he asked. 'It feels safer with two people holding on, and then we'll be



faster. Hainar needs to be in a good mood."

Valentin said the last sentence rather quietly. Antonia grinned and gave the disgruntled captain a quick glance before setting off. The other sailors were also working, even though they didn't really have anything to do. Summer had abandoned them on this part of the journey.

Just before Antonia entered the cabin, she raised her head. She paused and looked hopefully at the sky. A crack could be seen briefly in the grey sky, which seemed to form the silhouette of a mask with a beak, but the wind blew it out again and behind it only more dark clouds waited.

*I hover far above them and look down on them. The girl disappears and comes closer to me. I am down in the ship's hold and wait for her, while I follow her like a gust of wind from behind. The fire is already burning.*

Antonia jumped into the pale beam of light that the open hatch painted on the floor. John's hammock was a dark shadow in front of the shadows behind it. John had sat up.

'Did you talk to Thomas too long about the Vitalienbrüder last night, you lazy dog?' Antonia asked with a grin. 'I admire the fact that you are satisfied with talking about the same thing every evening for so long.'

Antonia expected a cheerful reply. However, Johannes merely groaned and lay down again.

'Valentin needs our help,' said Antonia, approaching him in wonder, 'you have to get up slowly, otherwise Rüdiger and Thomas will annoy him again. You lazy sea slug, come on.'

Johannes raised his head slightly again. 'What did you say?' he asked, confused.

Antonia looked at him with concern. Johannes' face shimmered pale out of the shadows. His eyes seemed smaller than usual.

'You look sick,' she said, coming closer, "Are you feeling well?"

Johannes let his head fall back into the hammock. "I have pain in my legs and arms," he murmured weakly, 'and in my head too.'

Antonia paused for a moment, trying to quell the stab of concern that was taking hold of her. Then she put a hand on Johannes' forehead. Ava had often warned her that illnesses were contagious, but she didn't care about that right now. Johannes' forehead was hot, while his body trembled. She raised her hand again and gently patted his shoulder.

'I'll tell Paul,' she said, climbing back up onto the deck, 'I'll be right back.'

Paul brought a bucket of water with him when he came downstairs. Johannes had closed his eyes again and seemed to be sleeping. The cook wiped his forehead with a damp cloth, which only caused Johannes to groan again. Paul frowned and remained bent over him for a while.

'Go back to work,' he said, 'You have nothing to do here.'

Antonia remained standing, however. She watched motionlessly as the ship's cook tended to her friend. Memories swirled around in her mind, of the neighbours on her street, of her two siblings who had not survived their first year of life. Diseases had wiped out entire neighbourhoods. They had seen it in the cities they had visited, too. Boarded-up windows and wagons with corpses tied up inside. The worry pierced her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe.

'Can you help him somehow?' she asked, noticing that her voice had become higher than usual.

Paul just muttered something to himself that sounded like a good-natured 'Go, work!' but he didn't answer.

Antonia sensed something. She wasn't sure if she imagined it in the midst of her despair, but for a brief moment she could feel a presence; like a ghost silently staring at her. Then the feeling was gone again and it was just Smutje, a sick body and the salty air in the room.

'I'll go and tell Hainar,' she said in a cracked voice, turning around and climbing up into the pale daylight.

The day passed in tension. Paul took Johannes to the tiny cabin at the far end of the storeroom after a while to isolate him from the rest of the crew. Antonia was teamed up with Valentin, while Rüdiger, who usually worked with him, spent the day with Walter. But she couldn't concentrate and didn't answer when Valentin asked her something.

The last port of call before London would be Bruges, to avoid a small storm that, according to the crew's weather nose, was spreading in the west. The ship headed for the harbour towards evening and moored at a dock, whereupon Hainar personally disembarked and entered a house by the harbour.

Antonia leaned against the railing and looked at the strange houses, lost in thought. She was cold but ignored the cold. However, she couldn't push away the icy feeling inside her. It wasn't long before it drove her back to the storage room, near Johannes' small cabin.

The storeroom was dark and silent as always. Antonia had always found the place reassuring, but now it had become threatening.

After a while she opened the door and went in. It was hot, like being in an oven. Johannes had been laid on a wooden bench with a few blankets, and it took up almost the whole room. Johannes' body was barely visible in the dim light.

'Johannes?' Antonia asked quietly, although she didn't expect an answer. He seemed to be sleeping. His chest moved restlessly up and down.

Antonia carefully closed the door behind her and sank down at the end of the plank bed. One of her hands wandered next to Johannes' head, which was on her side, and tapped nervously back and forth. She couldn't imagine what she would do if he died, if his breath suddenly left him and only the shell of the body remained. She couldn't imagine what would happen after that. It would be too confusing, almost as if a world without Johannes wasn't possible. This idea felt like a deep hole into which she would fall, and she was afraid of its depth.

In the last few years, a new feeling had developed in her when she was with Johannes. She didn't know what it was, and she wasn't sure. But she realised that, whatever it was, she liked him. She liked him enough not to want to lose him.

The ship rocked gently and the sound of boots drumming on wooden planks penetrated the ship's wall. Shortly afterwards, there was scraping and a few more voices on deck. Antonia ignored all the noises, absorbed in her own thoughts.

She was startled only when she heard footsteps on the stairs to the storeroom. The door swung open with a gust of wind, and Antonia prepared herself for a lecture, before she was relieved to see that it was Jacob. Her brother made a surprised face and stopped.

'Antonia, Emil, what are you doing? Come out of there!' he said quietly. 'It's not allowed to be here. There's work to be done upstairs.'

Antonia stared at him defiantly. 'Johannes is my friend. I'm not leaving him alone. And I'm finished with my work.'

'That won't stop you from catching the plague if you get too close to him. It's bad enough that one person on board is dying!' Jakob said, more forcefully than she had ever seen him. He pulled her kindly out of the cabin with him before closing the door. She tripped over the sacks on the floor.

'Let go of me!' she hissed in surprise, glaring angrily at Jacob.

'There's no need to get so worked up,' he said simply. 'I'm serious. It's foolish to sit with someone who's sick. You know that! Actually, you got the same warnings as me.'

Antonia glared at the door for a while, but she couldn't really be angry with her brother. She knew he was right.

'Is it really the plague that Johannes has?' she asked after a few seconds.

Jakob shrugged his shoulders in concern. 'Paul says so. And he knows a lot more about it than we do, he used to work in a castle... with a physician. He called it bubonic plague, I think. And you remember the little alleys near our home, where all the windows were boarded up? Those streets are... well... almost all dead.'

'But you can cure it, right?' Antonia asked tentatively.

'Ask Paul. But I don't think so,' her brother replied. 'You can always pray. Come back up sometime – but don't go in there again. Hainar has gotten herbs, Paul will probably come back. And we'll eat in a guardhouse.'

Antonia stared after him as he climbed back onto the deck. She had been praying quietly all day, but she had snuck out of service so many times that she didn't have much hope.

She felt too oppressed to sit on the deck with the others and sing, as if she were in a deep, dark hole. Gloomy, she went over to the linen bag with her things and sank to the floor. The creaking and groaning continued to envelop her, the ocean singing a song for her. The shadows crowded around her like the beaks of black birds.

A tear finally rolled out of her eye, but she vigorously wiped it away. She had to keep herself busy, otherwise she would sink into her sadness. She crossed her legs and pulled the sack with the things she had taken with her onto her legs and began to rummage through it desperately. She found the scissors she hadn't used in a while, a shirt she had stolen from Jacob before leaving Lübeck. She had only been gone a few months, but it felt like several years. And above all, she was free now, free as a seabird floating in the sky. But the smile faded from her face again when she remembered that the friend who had made her escape possible was so close to death that he would soon be shaking hands with him.

It's so strange, she thought, reaching into the sack again, I left to escape someone who loved me – and now someone I love is escaping me. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if I'd just stayed. She paused. There was a rustling sound as she touched her grandmother's letters, which had slipped to the very bottom. She carefully pulled them out and tried to find a gap in the light wide enough to read the letters.

*Dear Viola,*

*The work here is exhausting. I have made a few trips to the surrounding fields in the last few days to collect lavender. The plagues spread quickly, especially the poor suffer from them because they sleep together in crowds and sometimes have to eat out of the ditches – sometimes I don't get a proper night's sleep for days. And most of them don't want my help. One of my neighbours lost a child, but he repeatedly refused my help. And now he accused me of bewitching the child as punishment for not being allowed to take care of it, and I was almost dragged away by the city guard.*

*I don't know how quickly the plagues spread in your country. I hope that there are enough good herbalists left for you who have not yet been kidnapped. I feel sorry for the dying. But the knowledge remains small, and I will not be able to help people if they themselves destroy what would have saved them.*

Antonia read her grandmother's lines several times and pondered. If her grandmother had been here, she might have been able to help. Perhaps she could have helped her mother, too, if she hadn't already been dead. She had been able to cure almost all diseases, but there was no cure for secrecy, as she had once written.

The girl sadly leafed through the old, almost disintegrating pages. Some letters were barely legible, or scribbled with drawings in the margins, showing plants or strange devices. She searched more and more feverishly when she realised that there were several letters in which her grandmother spoke of herbs that could help, or of things she had done with the sick. She had also mentioned the bubonic plague, as Paul had said it was. Perhaps her grandmother was here after all. Her words were preserved in these old letters, and maybe a little of her talent was also in Antonia's blood.

The words in front of her became clearer and clearer the more letters she found with remedies.

She finally began to read them aloud in a whisper as she searched. Her voice sounded eerie through the darkness and the soft lapping. When Antonia raised her head and the shadows moved, she once again had the feeling of sensing someone else's thoughts. It was like hearing another person's breathing, but she only sensed it. 'Grandmother?' she asked softly.

*The letters lie on the sacks like white shrouds. The girl sorts through them as if they were the bones of a fortune teller or the cloths she used to treat the sick. I hover in the shadows while the fire rages behind the wall. And threatens to devour another life.*

*She looks up. The whisper from her mouth speaks into the void, as if she were speaking to me. But she is not, she is not speaking to anyone. They are familiar words she speaks. I have seen each of them before, written in ink on white parchment. They were written and spoken not only to the fire, but also to me.*

*I feel closer to her than usual. When she raises her head, she almost looks me in the eye, but then her eyes just search the shadows again.*

*She called me her grandmother. I don't know what that means. But it doesn't seem to have any meaning, because her gaze drifts away from me again and back to the words she is reading to me, as if they were my own. Then I disappear behind the door again, where I know she will follow me. It doesn't take long for her to arrive. The skin I'm under starts to deform and the fire has become a faint glow, suppressing the heat more and more.*

*She tries to extinguish it with water. As she does so, she looks at the body, into its eyes, even though they are closed. The words envelop her hands like a halo, like a song in my thoughts. Something familiar, as I look at her through the fire. But I don't know from where.*

Antonia tried to ignore her feelings as she followed the instructions from the letters. No one on the crew knew she was down here. Paul had come down again and left the herbs around Johannes' head. Antonia recognised some of them. Lavender was among them, but most of it was just an unrecognisable mixture of dried leaves. It would have to do.

Ava had taught her to be disgusted by almost nothing, even as a small child. As a housewife, she had explained, you often had to do the most disgusting work without anyone helping you or taking the work off your hands. That was her luck, because the illness that weighed down the boy was really unsavory, even more so what she had to do about it.

Before she used the herbs, she looked around again. She felt the shadows like a second being watching over Johannes' bed. She was incredibly hot, like the whole room, but she couldn't follow the instructions that she had to provide fresh air here in the ship's hull.

'Am I doing it right?' she whispered, hoping that it was her grandmother watching over her. There was no answer, but her friend gasped once and turned his head without opening his eyes.

She continued her work without being distracted again. Johannes' body seemed to be burning inside, but he was still shivering. His neck and shoulders were swollen, with strange lumps. Antonia carefully poured him more water, which the thirsty boy absorbed like dry earth.

*Her movements dance around me as if she were a ghost like me. Sometimes her gaze glides past me like a touch. The longing for the gaze has become wrenching, as if it were I who am burning now – even though I cannot even burn.*

*The water splashes against the walls, but cannot extinguish the fire within. But the girl does not burn, she walks through the fire as if invulnerable and to the music of the words she has brought from the memory of the dead.*

Antonia was sweating as she paused again for a moment and looked at Johannes' face. The ghost that accompanied her danced around her as if helping her with her work. Sometimes she thought

she saw a facial expression flash somewhere, or felt a draft under her hands.

Johannes' eyelids fluttered as his hand groped across the plank bed. Antonia gently took his hand in hers, waiting to see if he would say something.

Johannes turned his head to the side and stared at her in confusion. Then he apparently tried to smile, but it looked distorted.

'Antonia,' he whispered.

'I'm here,' she replied softly. "I'll bring you back. I won't just let you disappear."

Johannes turned his head back. "The sun is shining outside," he murmured indistinctly.

Antonia looked around confused. She wasn't sure, but the sun had been setting for a while and Johannes couldn't see what was happening outside.

She finally just put her hand on his forehead and closed his eyes.

'I'm sure. Now sleep and rest. Tomorrow we'll go out into the sun again. All right?'

Johannes actually smiled a little. 'Archery. I'll give you the new arrows I owe you.'

Antonia had to smile a little too. 'Even though I cheated. Now sleep.'

Johannes obeyed and began to breathe deeply again. Antonia gently stroked his forehead, which was shrouded in shadow. 'Sleep well,' she murmured. 'I love you.' But she didn't know if he could still hear it.

She pulled the thin blanket back over her friend and took her hand from his forehead.

As she stood up and reached for the pot of water and herbs, she finally looked up and saw what she had been watching all along. The shadows solidified into a figure that awaited her gaze. Like a figure of smoke, she stood facing her, staring at her. The figure wore a cloak and a mask that formed a bird's beak.

Antonia returned the gaze, standing erect and as if under a spell. The air seemed to shimmer between them as the immortal presence and the girl looked at each other without blinking. She suddenly knew who she had before her. She reached out her hand. 'Go!' She whispered, 'Leave him here and disappear.'

*The girl suddenly stares at me. Right into the eyes I don't have, right into the soul that doesn't exist.*

*For the first time, I am no longer sure whether I am floating or walking, or whether I am thinking or feeling. The surface of her eyes suddenly reflects me, and so does her soul behind them. A look that touches me. I suddenly recognise the eyes. Gazing that looks at me through the fire. Words that are written in a book. Everything disappears in the end in the fire before it gets cold.*

*The dance is suddenly over. For a few seconds I realise that I feel as if the fire is taking hold of me. 'Go!' She says, 'Leave him here and disappear.'*

*And I disappear. Like a fire extinguished by the wind, I withdraw and float back into the shadows, back into the world where I am neither spirit nor body nor object. Where all people are the same.*

*'You lack the book!' I whisper as I walk away, 'saved from the fire.'*

*Then my reflection disappears in her eyes. I feel the fire raging in a thousand bodies again. I am in a thousand places in the world. I am in the houses with the nailed-up boards, in the alleys and the rats. On the quay of the brown city and in the villages of the country.*

*But I am no longer on board the ship of the nation. The ship's mast rises into the sky and continues on to the grey city, to a fate that no longer interests me.*

## Chapter 5

'Are you okay?'

Johannes grimaced with exertion and pain as he inhaled the morning sea air. He was on the road to recovery, but despite the cure, he still didn't feel well. But he wasn't contagious anymore either, at least that's what the crew thought.

'I'm fine,' he grunted between clenched teeth and then panted out the air again.

Worried, she touched his shoulder.

'You're shaking like a freshly caught mackerel! You'd better go back to bed, or you'll catch another disease,' she added gently, pushing a strand of unruly hair back behind her ear. "Just make sure it's not *too* tight..." Thomas said as he shuffled past them.

The two looked at each other in confusion and shrugged their shoulders at the strange comment.

'Strange fellow,' Johannes mumbled, "but going inside sounds good."

He carefully padded across the deck into the belly of the ship. After Antonia had helped him back to his bunk, she returned to her previous place at the railing and brooded over the events of the last night.

The morning was bleak and cold. Wafts of mist drifted across the grey water together with the floe, and the breeze made her shiver. Apart from a cloud above them, which was a little darker than the others, there was nothing exciting to see. Only grey in all directions.

Was it just a cloud, or did it hide the shadow that had been following Johannes? She felt a tension inside her that she had rarely felt before. The feeling of being watched, coupled with an irrepressible fear for her friend.

The crew was still asleep, with the exception of Thomas and the captain, so all she could hear was the lapping of the waves at the bow. According to Thomas, they should arrive in London tomorrow. Finally. This long journey would finally come to an end. And the book...

Antonia was unsure whether she had dreamt this part of the night or whether this entity, this personification of the disease, had really communicated with her.

She would have to keep her eyes open after that.

'Hey, *Emil*,' she heard over the deck, tearing Antonia out of her thoughts.

'Yes?' she replied, turning around. Thomas was standing behind her, grinning at her in his crooked way: 'Go up the mast and lower the sail. The captain says full speed ahead.'

She nodded stiffly: 'Aye.'

'And...' he said after a moment's hesitation, "physical work also lifts the spirits, doesn't it?" He patted her on the shoulder and went back to his work on the bulkheads. Antonia watched the older sailor go and thought to herself: *He's a strange guy, but really nice.*

She shook herself and started to climb the mast. When she reached the yard, she untied the ropes that held the sail shorter. When the last part of the square sail fell, there was a barely noticeable jolt and the speed increased slightly, to perhaps four knots.

The breeze that Antonia had felt on deck was also much stronger at the yard, so that she had to cling to the mast to avoid falling down.

A single ray of sunrise broke through the sea of clouds and illuminated the floe for a moment. She closed her eyes briefly and laughed heartily, feeling the sunny warmth and the wind in her hair.

*This is what freedom feels like!*, she thought.

The city adjusted its colours to the weather; it was grey, like the clouds above her. The floe entered the port of London, passing many other ships of various designs: some were fishing boats, but there were also many cogs and even a galleon. Manoeuvring became more difficult due to the dense mass of watercraft, so they only made slow progress.

'All hands to the oars!' Heinar barked across the deck, 'And anyone who's about to faint, get to the sails!'

Hustle and bustle broke out and all crew members jostled for their favourite positions. Antonia weaved her way through the much larger sailors and climbed up the mast to the square sail, not unlike a monkey. Johannes, Arnold and Valentin quickly joined her and got ready too.

'Is there a place in sight?' Jakob shouted up to Paul in the crow's nest.

'Nothing yet, Kaufmann!' the cook shouted down and went back to looking for a mooring place among all the other ships.

Antonia saw her brother go to Heinar and get into what looked like a heated argument with him.

'Captain!' came from above: "There's a suitable mooring on the port side in six lengths!"

The two seemed relieved and the skipper nodded to Fabian, who was at the helm.

The course of the Plaiice was then corrected and they slowly steered in the direction of the lane between the ships.

'Rudder to port!' Heinar shouted, "Release the sheets! Reef the sails!"

'Aye!' the crew shouted in unison and hurried to carry out the orders.

Four of the sailors rowed the cog slightly lurching into the gap, while the mast climbers left their posts after they had fulfilled their part.

Thomas, Walter and Rüdiger each took a rope and spread out to port, starboard and the forecastle.

A few strong men who looked like dockers now appeared at the jetty. They nodded to the crew members.

With a swing, the three on deck threw their ropes to the workers, who caught them with practised ease.

With a speed and skill that one would not have expected from the porters, they tied the ropes to the bollards.

The crew of the Scholle spread out on the long ropes and pulled on a shouted: 'And pull!' by Heinar, who stood on the aft castle for a better overview.

Antonia realised that she had never thought about the weight of the plaice before, while sweat gathered on her forehead.

After a few minutes of heavy pulling, the ship was finally in the right position and the ropes were lashed down.

Everyone straightened up and lined up in a row.

Heinar and Jakob walked down the line of sailors.

They scrutinised each and every one of them, who had become a team over the last few weeks.

'You've been through a lot together on this journey,' Jakob began. "You've weathered all kinds of weather and kept sailing no matter whether it was sun, wind or storm. Do you agree?"

'Aye!' the crew roared unanimously.

'You defended the cargo from waves and pirates!'

'Aye!'

'Captain!'

'Yes, merchant?' Heinar asked seriously, looking at her brother's face.

'Do you think these sailors deserve a reward?'

The ship's captain was silent for a moment, looking each sailor in the eye.

When his gaze rested on Antonia, she had to swallow hard. His eyes, grey like the water lapping at the bow, seemed to pierce her and nail her to the deck.

He narrowed his eyes, and Antonia felt as though her head were engulfed in flames, just to avoid that look. Her throat felt like it had the good idea of tightening to prevent any air from getting through.

*He'll recognise me, she thought, and there's nothing I can do about it. He's got me now.*

Then those hawk eyes wandered again and Antonia had to force herself not to let out a sigh of relief.

When the captain had finished inspecting them, he said curtly, 'Yes, sir, I think these sailors deserve a reward.'

Jakob nodded curtly and then said louder again in the direction of the crew: 'Then you have earned a few days in the steel yard, which I will finance!'

'Aye!' This time the crew sounded genuinely enthusiastic.

'Get some rest and then you can sign on wherever you want,' Jakob continued, 'We completed this journey together. Thank you very much for that, gentlemen. You can go now.'

*I keep my distance, although I could find a way into the ship and into the girl's heart. She certainly can't stop thinking about me. I could go back to the ship and try with the old man...*

*No! I have to focus on more important things. The fire has to be kept burning. The Grey City is a bigger goal that requires my attention. Flames are already licking behind some windows, but nowhere near enough. No pits for the burned out are being dug at the gates yet. No helpless, bird-faced quacks are running around pretending to be helpful. I am not satisfied yet. But my nagging messengers cavort in the dark alleys and spread the black news: the entire city will be in flames when the black death is finished with it!*

## Chapter 6

Antonia woke up and wondered where she was. She was not in a hammock, although she imagined that it was still rocking. Voices came through the walls. Then she remembered that she was in the steel yard where they had arrived yesterday. She heard voices shouting and orders being given, and the rolling of barrels on cobblestones, the same melody she had heard before she left Lübeck.

She stretched and enjoyed it for a moment, finally lying on something other than a hammock again.



Then she stood up. Hers was the only bed that was still occupied. Apart from her, there had only been men in the room. On the ship, she hadn't given it much thought, but since she had been asked that evening if she didn't want to wash, she wondered if it might be safer to separate from the seafarers.

She made her way to the quay. Johannes was already cheerfully approaching her. Apart from a few slight scars, there was no sign that he had almost died a few days ago. The sun was shining through his hair and for the first time in months he had a blade of grass in his mouth again.

'Good morning, sleepyhead!' he laughed. "We were supposed to prepare breakfast for the crew together, but I did it alone."

He looked at her with a playful air of reproach. It was the first time they had met in a town in months. Their clothes were more tattered than before and their hair had grown. Antonia grinned dreamily for a moment and then replied,

'It's a shame you didn't have the courage to wake me. But thank you!'"

Johannes grinned and pulled her onto the ship with him. The other sailors were already sitting in a circle, filling their bowls with porridge.

Antonia hadn't seen Jakob since that evening. The sailors didn't know where he was, but she suspected that he was probably beginning his merchant training.

She sighed inwardly. For Jacob, the more unpleasant part of his journey now began. She herself did not yet know what would happen now. She had managed to escape, but when she left, she had not yet seen enough of the world to really recognise how her life would continue in London.

Nobody was looking after her here, and all she had were a few old letters.

Johannes noticed how pensive his friend was after a while and beckoned her to the bow after dinner to talk quietly with her. The water splashed merrily against the wall, but it was only audible if you listened very carefully.

'We're in London now. Are we making a run for it, the two of us?' Johannes asked.

'I think so,' Antonia replied. "I'm afraid someone will discover me. Here I am far enough from that disgusting Green Mantle who wanted to marry me at all costs. But I guess I really have to be careful."

'Why?' Johannes asked, leaning over the railing. 'Nobody here knows you. People can't even understand what we're saying.'

'No, I think it's because of my grandmother,' Antonia said. Before she could explain, Johannes nodded.

'That's right, I remember what you mean,' he said thoughtfully. "A few of the others are probably getting off at this port, too. You know," he nudged her, grinning, 'I think Arnold and Fabian are trying to escape from something, too. They have never gone ashore at a port before, except here.'

'That's them,' Antonia replied seriously, 'Arnold told me. They were almost killed because they went hunting when they weren't allowed to. And since then they have been fleeing. They said that once you're on the run, you're always on the run.'

Johannes was silent for quite a while after she said it.

'Well,' he replied, "in any case, it's clear that I now owe you something, and so I'll definitely come with you if you flee, yes?"

Antonia smiled a little and watched the seagulls flying over the roofs of the grey city.

'We'll start by moving out of the steel yard. I don't expect I'll find Jakob again anyway,' she said.

She was a little sad. Jakob had taught her how to read and write and helped her when her father had been too strict. And he had never betrayed her. But she had no choice.

Hainer Scholle strode up and down in front of the sailors as they returned.

'We've put together a capable crew,' he said, looking at the group, 'Now, who among you is also signing on for the next voyage?'

Thomas put his hand up, but Hainer didn't seem surprised by that. He just gave him a quick, confidential nod. Arnold and Fabian looked at each other and then threw their hands in the air. Paul had put his hand up too. Rüdiger just shook his head and carried on eating. Valentin stared at his feet and mumbled something.

'Speak up!' Hainer thundered at him, causing Valentin to raise his head in shock.

'I'll give my answer tomorrow,' he said clearly, quickly looking back at his feet. Hainer grumbled angrily but left him alone.

'And you two!' he turned to Johannes and Antonia.

'I just wanted to travel to London,' Antonia replied, and Johannes just nodded in agreement. Hainer grasped them both by the shoulders.

'You'll see, it won't be long before you feel the yearning for the sea in your bones again,' he growled. 'Now go and show what you've learned.'

Antonia and Johannes looked at each other somewhat embarrassed, unsure of what was required of them. Hainer said the same goodbye to Rüdiger, who grinned triumphantly at Valentin and then disembarked.

Antonia and Johannes said goodbye somewhat embarrassed and set off shortly afterwards with Antonia's bag. Antonia noticed how Valentin stared after them sadly before turning away again. Hainer stopped them once more before they left the plank.

'You haven't been paid your wages yet,' he reminded them, holding out two bags of coins. The two young travellers accepted the money with surprise and nodded to the captain in conclusion.

'Ahoj, captain,' said Johannes, saluting.

'Ahoj,' Antonia said quietly, adding, "Hainer Scholle." The old captain truly deserved the nickname. He smiled briefly, a rare gesture on his serious face, then clattered back across the plank onto the ship.

The Stahlhof was separated from the rest of the quay. Johannes and Antonia could have simply walked through the entrance gates, but that was too easy for two stray dogs from Lübeck who liked to climb on roofs.

They reconnoitred where the guards were stationed. They split up, Antonia followed the terrain north of the building. When she found the first guard, she hid under a pillar so that she would not arouse suspicion. Then she realised that someone else was coming and almost stopped breathing. As they began to talk, they listened in amazement as, after a few sentences, they began to say something they could understand.

'Frank! I can't man the post at the east exit, do you think I'll get shot if I leave it unguarded?' asked one of them.

'Do what you want,' the other replied, "but don't drag me into it. I know nothing about it and I didn't give you any tips."

Antonia pushed herself away from the wall of the house again and looked for Johannes. She found him just as he had arrived at the end of his round.

'The east gate is unguarded right now,' Antonia said hastily, "let's take the chance and get out of the steel courtyard without anyone suspecting anything." Johannes wanted to answer, but Antonia grabbed him by the arm and pulled him towards the east gate without him being able to say anything. When they arrived at the east gate, they stopped as if frozen.

The clattering steps of a guard sounded around the corner. But they waited until she passed. A moment later, they ran out of the gate and continued until they could no longer see it. They breathed a sigh of relief because they had made it.

'Are you okay? Or was that too exhausting?' Antonia asked. Since Johannes was still a bit under the weather, he gasped a little and only managed a strained, 'Yes, I'm fine.'

'Are you sure?' she asked.

'Yes, I'm fine. I'm much better than I was a few days ago,' he said. "Now run, let's see if I'm still faster than you."

After they had run a few hundred metres more, Johannes said seriously again, 'We should find a place to sleep. I don't fancy lying on the street here tonight.'

Antonia gasped, still grinning from ear to ear. 'We didn't have to run so fast, I'm sure we would have just been let through the gate.'

Johannes grinned again and adjusted the knife on his belt. 'That's right, but it's so much more fun.'

Antonia grinned and they strolled together through the alleys. The houses near the riverbank had strange flaps in front of their doors to keep the water from entering the living quarters. Around the Stahlhof, the houses looked as richly decorated as those on Antonia's home street.

'Look over there! Perhaps a few moments away is the artisan quarter. We can ask if we can lie down in the stables there,' Johannes suggested.

A few minutes later they had arrived in the quarter. The houses were built of grey stone, like almost everywhere in the city, but they were significantly smaller than those around the steel yard.

There was a hustle and bustle in the streets, people were bringing goods to the marketplace and children were playing. Antonia watched them, grinning to herself at the thought that she and Johannes had once played like that too. Then she concentrated on her task again.

It was already dusk when they left the street again. The fact that they didn't understand the language of the country had proven to be a major difficulty. Most of their attempts had ended with someone chasing them away.

Johannes yawned and looked uneasily at the people staggering out of a tavern as it began to rain. 'Maybe we should have done it like Valentin,' he admitted, 'That boy is really quite clever when you watch him closely. But now we'll probably have to sneak in somewhere.'

Antonia looked a little discontented. 'We don't really know our way around here very well,' she said, 'and the city is much bigger than it is at home.'

'After all, it is the most important city in England,' replied Johannes. 'Let's just keep looking in the alleys. What was your grandmother's name, anyway?'

Antonia went over the letters in her head that she had read several times now.

'She always just wrote 'your loving mother' or something like that,' she said, 'But my mother's name was Viola and she was from here. All I know about grandmother is that she lived here and was a healer. Her husband was a physician, and when he died, she took over the business – and was then burned as a witch.'

'Maybe we can find someone who speaks our language,' suggested Johannes, "and ask them about accommodation. Otherwise we'll have to go back to the ice floe – or sleep in a courtyard."

'I think this city is quite different from Lübeck,' replied Antonia nervously.

The rain pelted down on the pavement, reflecting the grey sky. More people poured out of the tavern where they had sheltered from the rain, which was still coming down in sheets.

'I don't really fancy sleeping in the alleys in this weather,' Antonia murmured.

Before she had finished the sentence, someone from the crowd turned to them. 'Sleepover?' he asked vaguely. 'Are you looking for a sleepover?'

Antonia just shook her head in embarrassment and tried to explain with hand movements that she didn't speak the language. Johannes just nodded at her.

The man grabbed Antonia by the shoulder and turned her around so that she could see into an alley.

'There is... A man?' the stranger tried with broken foreign words, "A man who lets strangers sleep in his house. House for... Sleeping. He speaks German. Come with me."

'What did he say?' Johannes asked, confused, and followed Antonia, who was being pulled into the alley by the man.

They stopped in front of a narrow, grey house with crooked windows, nestled in the row of houses on the lane. Rusty signs hung over the doors and shop windows, swaying alone under the patter of the raindrops. But the house in front of them had no shop windows, only a door leading inside.

The man let go of Antonia, beckoned to Johannes and pointed at the house. He said a few words,

of which they understood nothing, and then ran off again. The two youths looked after him in confusion.

'Did you understand anything?' Johannes asked, baffled.

'I think he knew a bit of German. And he wanted to take us to this house because you can sleep here,' replied Antonia. "Shall we knock?"

They both stood around awkwardly for a while, waiting for the other to do something. Finally, Johannes knocked on the heavy wooden doors just as Antonia had raised her arm.

For a while, the house seemed as deserted as the alley. The rain had soaked them to the bone when someone finally moved a bolt from the inside and the upper door opened with a scratching sound. The face that appeared behind it was covered in wrinkles and age spots, but the old man looked at them with friendly brown eyes.

'Hello,' said Johannes shyly, "We, um, are looking for a place to sleep..." he faltered and waited for an answer to find out if the man understood him.

The man's features twisted into a smile. "Ah, seamen," he replied with a sharp accent but in their language, 'Where are you coming from?'

'Lübeck,' Antonia replied. "Can we come in, please?"

'Well, I suppose that's all right. Just wait a moment while I open the door. My old fingers aren't as nimble as yours.'

The man ducked behind the wooden boards and a moment later the door opened fully. The two travellers entered with relief. The man closed the door behind them and the hallway in which they found themselves was suddenly bathed in a dim light, illuminated only by the lamp the man held in his hand.

'What exactly do you want?' He asked, while he put the bolt back in place.

'We are looking for a place to sleep for the night and wanted to ask if we can sleep here,' said Antonia, 'We don't want to travel on, but stay in London for a while. Someone sent us here.'

The man looked at them kindly. 'Of course. I sometimes take in strangers, I'm always happy for some company. I live here alone. There used to be a friend and his wife here, who had a lot of customers, but they passed away.'

The man led them up a narrow staircase until they arrived in the attic, where there were four beds.

'You can sleep there,' he said. "You can come down and sit by the fire. I want to have a conversation with someone again."

With these words and a quick, searching glance at Antonia's face, the man had disappeared again. Antonia and Johannes grinned at each other and put their things on the two beds on the left.

'Shall we go downstairs?' Antonia asked. Johannes nodded after a moment.

The man was waiting for them in front of a fireplace, sitting in a wooden armchair. He looked at them as they entered and smiled kindly.

'I've put on some tea,' he said, 'Sit down.'

Hesitantly, the guests sat down on the chairs that had been offered to them. The man poured a few herbs into the cups that were on the floor and poured water into them. He handed them to them.

His hands were brownish, as if from years of working with clay and soil.

'So,' he said, 'now tell me. Or ask questions. I'll wait.'

Johannes and Antonia looked at each other again, and Antonia cleared her throat.

'How is it that you speak our language?' she asked.

The man laughed. 'Good question. The two friends who lived here spoke it. They turned up here, much like you, but I've only just been here too, and we became friends. We ate and played together almost every evening. Some days, when we were really in the mood, we went for a walk. Now and then he also had his wife with him, then she and my wife cooked together.'

'That sounds like fun,' Antonia replied. "What did they die of?"

'My friend of an illness,' the man said, staring into the fire and nodding, 'and his wife later... but you

don't talk about that. They raised their daughter here, nice kid, but she moved out at some point, got married. As it happens.'

The man looked at Antonia again a little strangely, and Johannes followed his gaze in confusion. Then the man got up and limped to a table in the corner of the small room.

'Drink your tea,' he said hoarsely, 'it's good.'

After a short while, he returned, holding a thick book in his hand, to the surprise of the travellers. He opened it when he sat back in his chair and stared at it for a while.

'There are a lot of recipes in there,' he said, 'the only thing they left of their skills. This is the book in which they recorded their knowledge of herbs and illnesses. We spent every free minute together since we were in our early twenties, went through ups and downs together and drank until we couldn't walk straight anymore. Those were the times when you drank too much in the evening and worked hard again the next morning. Sometimes I wish I was still that fit.'

He looked at the picture for a while, feeling sorry for himself, and continued: 'They were special people, and a special woman. She was able to help so many people. You see, she was a woman of the healing arts and she also wrote this book about her recipes. Shortly before she died, she gave me this book and said: 'Take good care of this book and when someone is seriously ill, you look it up.' I didn't understand it. She didn't have much time left after that.'

Antonia stared at him intently. "I think I know the woman," she said softly.

The man looked at her again for a while. "How exactly?"

'She was my grandmother,' replied Antonia. 'My mother grew up here and her mother was a healer, her husband was a medic. I still have the letters they sent each other.'

The man looked at her briefly. "That may well be," he said, "You have the same face as her daughter. Very similar. So you must be her son, right?"

Antonia paused briefly and shot a glance over at Johannes. "Yes," she finally said, 'I'm called Emil. This is Johannes.'

The man nodded and looked away again.

'I can't read,' he said. 'The only use I have for the book is the pictures. Take a look at it, maybe you can do more with it. It makes me sad to give it away, but you have the right to it if it belonged to your grandmother.'

Antonia accepted the book in amazement and reverently flipped through the pages, thrilled to have found her grandmother's trail so quickly. She had never been able to imagine what she would do when the time came, and now she was holding a precious book of healing recipes.

She paused when she came across a page that looked similar to the drawings on the letters. She slowly read through the text and recognised several instructions that she had used on the ship to help Johannes.

'Look,' she said, nudging him, 'I could have used that.'

Johannes leaned over to her and nodded. 'Maybe it will also help against the things that are still there now,' he said.

The man sat there for a while, gazing into the fire as if he saw more in it than flames. Then he turned cheerfully to the two guests again.

'So tell me your stories,' he said, 'and don't leave anything out. I still have time.'

When the fire went out, the old man wished Johannes and Antonia good night. After they had changed, they went to bed. The rocking of the ship, which had been etched into their minds, haunted them in their sleep.

In the middle of the night, Antonia woke up to a bubbling sound. She couldn't identify the noise. So she got up and got dressed. Johannes, who had been awakened by the noise, sat up wearily.

'What's the matter?' he grumbled, confused. 'Oh, we're not on the ship anymore. Why are you getting up?'

She replied quietly, 'Can't you hear the noise? I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Stay calm.'

Antonia went downstairs and saw the old man sitting over a pot. A liquid was simmering in the pot. Antonia cleared her throat and her host turned around, illuminated by the firelight. 'I'm sorry, I took the book I gave you again. I remembered a recipe that helps with my back pain. Lately I've been getting a bit more rickety,' he said. 'It's fine,' Antonia replied, 'I was just wondering about the noises. Does the recipe really work?' 'Yes! At least my back pain has magically disappeared,' the man reported enthusiastically. Antonia went back to bed feeling happy. Johannes, who was already waiting curiously, immediately asked what was going on, and Antonia explained. They talked for a while and then lay down again. Antonia's thoughts returned to her home, the house in Engelsgrube, as Mia had called it, and how her sister, Ava, and their father were doing. She fell asleep in the midst of her memories. The next morning, the old man was waiting for them with a delicious breakfast. He didn't ask for any payment. When they had eaten their fill, they thanked him for everything and the old man gave Antonia the book, but they promised to come back that evening to stay with him again. Johannes and Antonia walked excitedly through the streets, wondering what they could do in London if they wanted to live here, or whether they should join the clod after all. They continued through the city and then along the harbour and to the market because they still needed something for lunch. And so they bought a large loaf of bread.

## Chapter 7

It rained over London. Not a rare weather, as Johannes and Antonia had to realise after a few days. Fog and rain alternated, so that the city was constantly shrouded in a grey veil that muffled sounds and veiled figures like an invisible cloak that hid the refugees.

The second week of their stay in London had just begun. By now they knew their way around better than some Londoners, knew where to buy their food and they knew a few of the intricate little alleys, stairs and doors that led through the labyrinth of houses and walls. They had learned to understand a few words and phrases of the foreign language, but most of the time they communicated with hand signals.

Johannes opened the wooden window frames and leaned out into the alley. Antonia sat behind him on her bed and rubbed the sleep from her eyes as the cold, damp fog penetrated inside.

'See anything outside?' she asked wearily, wrapping herself in her blanket.

'Fog,' answered Johannes, "and a few people. We should start looking for work somewhere. But nobody here understands our language."

'How much money do we have left?' asked Antonia. Johannes shrugged his shoulders.

'Enough to eat for three days?' 'The medicine was the most expensive, and we haven't had time to look for herbs outside the city yet. We really have to think about what we're going to do,' Johannes said. He looked at Antonia with concern. The girl with the short, shaggy hair was still wearing her sailor's clothes and looked convincingly like a ship's boy whose hair had grown a little too long on the last trip. Only sometimes, when she stretched or bent over, did you realise that she was not a boy, let alone a man. It was always just a brief moment before the illusion closed again, hiding the dangerous truth. Nevertheless, she was sometimes only a hand's breadth away from betraying herself.

'Do you intend to stay in this disguise forever?' Johannes asked. 'Someone is bound to notice at some point.'

'What else should I do? Should I go back to Lübeck?' asked Antonia. "Should I go back to the sewing room after this adventure and learn housework? Forget it! I won't let myself..." she paused

briefly before continuing, 'I'd rather hide in danger and flee across five more seas than be trapped after what I've experienced!'

Johannes had to grin a little. But the laughter was less carefree than before the journey. They had both seen a lot. Some of the things the fisherman's boy would have preferred not to have known, but still he had no regrets about coming with him when he had discovered Antonia on the quay in her brother's clothes.

'I just mean,' he began, choosing his words carefully, 'it's possible that someone might still recognise you. I mean, you can still tell from... other things that you're... well, a woman. From your hair and clothes.'

He turned away hastily and looked out of the window when he realised that the blush was rising up his face. He bit his lip angrily and wiped his face, which was now damp from the morning mist.

'Maybe we should close the window before we talk about it,' his girlfriend replied behind him. He just nodded and closed the window sashes again, so that no one who understood their language could eavesdrop on their conversation. The walls in this neighbourhood of London were thin, but they had never heard sounds from the other gables and felt safer in their dark attic room than anywhere else.

'I think I know what you mean,' Antonia said, somewhat embarrassed, 'but there's not much I can do about it... and if I move quickly, no one will notice. In Lübeck, no one ever noticed when I walked around in my smock. Most of the time, people don't really look at children.'

'That's right,' Johannes admitted, 'you're probably right again. But... you're not a child anymore. And I think we still have to be careful. Maybe we should see if there's somewhere a little further out of town where we can sleep. And we need new money. It's already way too nice that we're just allowed to sleep here.'

'We should give him the rest if we move away,' said Antonia. 'I think he's really nice. It's great that we found out so quickly where my grandmother lived. And the book is wonderful. Do you want to try to buy some of the ingredients today? Maybe we can make money somehow, like grandmother and grandfather did.'

Johannes nodded and took the purse from its hiding place under the bed.

A faint creaking of floorboards came from downstairs.

'I think Godric is awake. So we can go down,' said Antonia, swinging the bag around her shoulders in which she had stowed her things.

Half an hour later, the two young adults had once again disappeared into the crowd in the market square. They strolled through the people who ignored the bad weather like rats in the sewers. The market stalls had covered their wares with cloths to protect them from the wet.

Traders laid their wares on the wooden boards of the stalls, including the fish and grain that the plaice had brought to London. Most people just looked at the stalls and didn't buy anything yet, most hadn't opened yet and the babble of voices was still muffled.

'The weather here doesn't suggest that it's summer,' grumbled Johannes, wiping the wetness from his face again, "it's at least the first morning watch, right? I find it difficult to measure time here."

'We were on a ship for months,' said Antonia, grinning, 'it was more water than just a few drops in the air. Don't be like that. And by now, summer is almost over.'

Johannes nodded. "That's right. What month is it? October?"

Antonia stopped and stood in a side street to avoid a group of people coming towards them. Johannes joined her. The crowds walking looked almost like funeral processions in the fog, ghostly figures emerging from nowhere.

'Shall we take a look at this alley?' Antonia suggested. "The market stalls aren't open yet, and maybe there are paths here that can help us."

'If you think so,' Johannes replied, following her at a slight distance into the shadows of the alley.

Behind the two youths, a stooped figure shuffled into the alley. Johannes turned around while Antonia kept running, and recognised their host, Godric, who was wrapped in a thick woolen cloth and leaning on a staff.

'Ah, there's the boy. Where's Emil?' he asked with a weak smile.

'Emil is here somewhere too,' Johannes replied. "He just ran on. What are you doing here?"

Godric laughed a little. "I'm buying bread," he replied. 'I'm going to the town hall and hoping that they still have bread to give away there. But usually they do. Sometimes I think they're sorry that they took away all my company.'

Johannes nodded and looked around nervously. Antonia had disappeared into the fog of the alley. 'Emil!' He called, but she was apparently already too far away to hear him.

'Why would they be sorry?' Johannes asked Godric, somewhat puzzled. The old man liked to tell stories, but it seemed that it was sometimes difficult for him, given his keen mind, to tell everything in the right order. However, he seemed to be about to tell a part of his story that Antonia certainly wanted to know. Apart from the conversation on the first evening, he had hardly spoken about what had happened to Antonia's grandmother.

'Well, they took my girlfriend away from me, and she was all I had left. She earned money, a lot of it, because sometimes rich people came to her. Until a few people died and their relatives said she was working with the devil,' Godric shook his head sadly, 'even though she was very pious, if not always in the normal way. But there are people for whom even God can't do anything anymore. The only thing saved from the fire was the book. But... yes. Some church people feel sorry for her. They know how hard it is to live here alone. I'll see you again tonight? Emil too?"

Johannes nodded hastily. 'Emil too, I'll bring him back. But I think I'll have to look for him quickly. Good luck at the town hall!'

Godric laughed slightly and then shuffled on with a brief nod.

Antonia looked at Johannes with a dirty face as he finally approached her out of the fog. He hadn't yet noticed the voices in the distance. He was about to speak when she put her hand over his mouth to silence him. Antonia motioned for him to speak quietly, to which he nodded in agreement.

'What's going on?' Johannes asked, confused. Antonia shot him a annoyed look.

'Are you deaf?'

The voices grew louder and were now accompanied by footsteps that sounded similar to the deep voices.

'Just be quiet for a moment, Johannes,' she admonished her companion, who apparently still hadn't noticed the voices and footsteps.



'What happened?' Johannes whispered. Antonia pushed him into another side street. The alleys looked eerie in the fog, as if they were passageways to the underworld, with no way out and surrounded by stone.

'I think they realised I was a girl,' Antonia said nervously, "and they behaved a bit strangely – you know, like the people in Parsley Lane. Father and Ava always said I should stay away from there. I ran away, across a roof. Where were you just then?"

'Godric spoke to me. Where to now?' Johannes asked.

'Well, first we have to get out of here!"

Antonia pulled the confused Johannes through another alley. They arrived at the market square, where crowds were gathering around many stalls. There were fruit and vegetable stalls, fish stalls, but also carvings and furs. It was loud and cramped on every path.

'Let's look at the paintings over there and then go to eat, shall we?' Johannes asked.

Antonia just kept quiet and looked nervously over her shoulder. Johannes followed her as she turned into another alleyway and then exited the market square from the other side.

'What are you doing? Do you want to walk in circles all day?' Johannes asked, confused. Antonia shook her head.

'I want to shake them off! They followed me, and if they recognise me, I'll have a problem! And not just me!' she replied, and disappeared into the crowd.

Johannes followed his girlfriend and now also began to look around, even though he didn't know what for. Antonia pulled him along after a few metres and ran her hands through her hair, hoping that it might make her look different.

'A- Emil!' whispered Johannes, "Emil, stop. We have to stay calm. Stand at some stall and look at something!"

Antonia reluctantly stopped and looked at a small ceramic cup on display at one of the stalls.

'Look, isn't that beautiful?' she remarked aloud, in an attempt to make their conversation seem a little more normal.

'Yes, but it's also expensive,' replied Johannes, 'and there are still no herbs here. Come on, let's keep looking.'

The two of them walked a few stalls further along, keeping a low profile. Antonia kept glancing back at the alley they had come from, and had to stop herself from running.

'Johannes,' she began quietly, "if they find me again, we have to think of something, quickly."

'They mustn't recognise you,' mused Johannes, 'so maybe you need a new cap?'

'I think we should get out of here first of all,' said Antonia quietly. She smoothed her hair back into place. Johannes now noticed even more clearly that Antonia couldn't hide the fact that she wasn't a boy with every movement. He pushed her between himself and the market stalls so that she was protected from most of the stares.

'I think the disguise isn't working so well anymore,' he said nervously, 'maybe it's better if you somehow get a dress again.'

'And what will Godric say to that?' Antonia asked desperately, 'then we'll have to find some other accommodation again, and leave him alone. Maybe we'll even have to leave London. Why couldn't

I have just been born a boy? If God wanted it that way, why does he make women stay in the house?’

Antonia looked as if she was about to start crying. Johannes looked around nervously, holding her gently by the shoulder so as not to lose her. Finally, he pulled himself together, turned around and embraced her. Just for a few seconds, then he let go of her and looked at her, hoping to have made some kind of impact.

‘We’ve managed to run away before!’ he said, more shakily than he would have liked, ‘You said you’d rather be on the run forever than marry someone, remember? That’s what you said. And running away was actually quite a lot of fun. And I’ll come with you. No matter where you go. It’s easier to escape together, you know that. Arnold and Fabian showed you that.’

He faltered and had the feeling that he had made things worse. To his surprise, Antonia merely wiped away her tears and nodded.

‘You’re right,’ she said grimly. ‘I’m finally free right now. And I won’t let them take that freedom away from me! I’ll have to run for my own sake, but I won’t wait for them to do to me what they did to grandmother. If they try, then let them see how I fight back!’

Johannes looked at Antonia with concern. The usually peaceful girl had a fire in her eyes that he had never seen before – and he felt sorry for anyone who would dare stand in her way.

‘Do you have a plan?’ he asked cautiously. Antonia took a deep breath and nodded.

‘Yes, I’ll buy a dress so that we can at least stay a few days. But we’re leaving again. I’m taking the book with me. And then we’ll travel on until... I don’t know. But... but we’ll still be careful.’

Johannes nodded and looked around again. “Did you see your pursuers again?” he asked.

Antonia shook her head. ‘No. But if someone asks, if I walk around in the dress, can we then... claim that you are my husband?’

Johannes stopped in his tracks. ‘Wh-why?’ he stuttered, suddenly wishing there weren’t so many people around them. Some were already starting to yell at them for blocking the way to the stalls.

Antonia didn’t look in his direction, she just looked over to the alleys with an indefinable look.

‘So... I have permission to walk around?’ she finally said, “Women aren’t allowed to do that almost anywhere on their own.”

Johannes felt his heart beating calm down again. He nodded and gently touched her shoulder again. ‘I’ll manage that,’ he said, “Then come on, we have to get you a dress.”

The sun moved like a lonely eye further into the sky. Slowly the veils of mist lifted and tore from time to time, so that a piece of grey sky could be seen. The people did their shopping, but otherwise stayed in their houses and looked at the ghostly city through their windows.

Antonia lit a small lamp in her attic room. Johannes was sitting on the bed with his back turned to her, while she slipped on her newly bought dress. It was the cheapest thing they had found, made of grey-brown sacking, matching the rest of the city, and scratchy like the hammocks on the ship.

She felt strange. The last time she had worn a dress, she had sat at the window of her attic room and watched Jakob wistfully as he loaded the ship, not yet knowing that her little sister would make her climb aboard and go to London with her. She smiled a little, before it passed from her face. She would likely not be able to return to Lübeck to thank Mia for it.

‘This feels so tight,’ she said, “I had already forgotten how difficult it is to move in clothes.”

Johannes laughed only briefly, keeping his eyes fixed on the window through which a narrow strip of light fell into the gloom.

'We have to hide your hair,' he said, "maybe you can use my cap for now. They are much too short for a woman."

'Don't we have a bonnet?' Antonia asked, 'otherwise people will think I'm not married.'

'Then we're just engaged. I don't know how to tell someone anyway. I don't know English,' Johannes replied, "I can only understand some words with difficulty."

Antonia agreed with him and struggled to close the last loop on her dress. The clothes she had worn at home had been a little more comfortable and beautiful. Besides, she had grown so accustomed to wearing shirts that the dress felt wrong.

'You can turn around now,' she said. Johannes turned around and nodded with wide eyes.

'It's been a long time since you wore a dress,' he said, voicing her thoughts. Antonia smiled a little.

'Yes, that's true,' she replied. 'I hope I can still act like a woman.'

'I'm afraid you never were very good at it,' Johannes murmured into his fledgling beard. He had to admit that Antonia had looked distinctly feminine in boy's clothes, but now, in a dress, she suddenly looked like a boy who had put on one of his sister's dresses.

Antonia gave him a stern look and tried to tie her hair, which was still a long way from being done. Johannes threw her his cap.

'So we're going to try and buy herbs now?' Johannes asked, jumping up again. Antonia looked nervously at the window frames, felt the fear bubbling up inside her, and nodded.

'Yes. But make sure Godric isn't in the hallway when I come down in the dress,' she said.

Johannes nodded at her and climbed down the narrow, dim staircase into the hallway. Antonia followed him carefully. Another new part of her story began. She would be Antonia again in London, leaving Emil behind on the ship. That was what she thought as she stepped out into the cold, gloomy fog again.

The clod was bobbing peacefully on the water, which shimmered only weakly through the fog. The drizzle, which had developed from the fog of the last few days, mixed with the gentle haze that rose from the Thames into the alleys.

Valentin leaned over the railing and watched the small waves lapping at the shore for a few minutes, carried there from distant lands and depths. The injuries from the pirate attack still hurt a little, but Paul had said that they would heal quickly enough not to bother him in a few days, when the floe set off.

'Were you there when the news came from the city earlier?' Fabian asked, chewing on some dried fruit as he stopped next to him. Valentin shook his head and gave his friend space at the railing.

'What's the news?' he asked, 'Is Rüdiger coming back after all?'

Fabian laughed. 'No, don't worry – even if you might finally learn to fight back. No, there is someone in the artisan quarters who supposedly had the plague – that's frightening enough. But he was cured, yesterday. By a woman.'

Valentin looked up in amazement. His thoughts raced back through the last few weeks – to Emil, who had cured Johannes in a mysterious way, to the conversations between the two friends that he had overheard by chance. And to the day when Emil had suddenly appeared on deck, a refugee

from Lübeck, who Jakob had claimed was a young friend of his. His thoughts flew quickly like a seabird over the sea, but he himself remained silent, as always.

'How did she do it?' he asked. He had never been entirely sure whether he was imagining all the hints. Maybe it was something completely different.

'I don't want to know,' Fabian said, 'but she must have had a book that allowed her to heal. From an old medicus. I think it's okay. At least if it really helps people.'

Fabian still sounded somewhat doubtful. Valentin just nodded and stared into the water.

'If you keep staring into the abyss, the abyss will soon stare back!' Thomas called from behind. He sighed and tried to ignore it. His sigh formed a small cloud in front of his mouth. It was really cold. He had hoped to escape the teasing and meanness when he ran away from home. But the sailors were tough guys. He still wasn't quite sure if they really meant their teasing as a joke. After all, who hurt others for fun? But at least he had been able to talk to Fabian and the two teenagers who had now disembarked without anyone beating him for telling them what he had learned from books.

'What's the matter, boy?' Fabian asked good-naturedly, patting him on the back. 'Is seasickness already getting you down? You really do get used to the water.'

Valentin shook his head. 'I don't mind the water,' he murmured, 'I just don't like my own thoughts.'

Fabian laughed. 'You think too much, little one,' he said, 'thoughts are worse than people when it comes to persecution. Don't let the news spoil your mood. Tomorrow we'll be gone again, away from all the grey of this city... I really prefer the countryside.'

Valentin just nodded and stared up at the wide, colourless sky. The clouds gathered like smoke.

The market square was even more crowded than usual. The weather was better than usual – that is, the drizzle sometimes paused for a few minutes and the damp air didn't soak you to the bone. Sometimes you could even see holes in the sky, looking like the mouths of monsters.

In the hustle and bustle, no one noticed the young couple in their poor clothes, who were exchanging money for a few herbs at a market stall. Antonia now had a bonnet on her head, hiding her shoulder-length hair and making her look convincingly like an ordinary citizen. With the money they had earned from Antonia's healing arts, Johannes had bought a waistcoat that made him look much more grown up than before.

The merchant behind the market stall counted out the coins, nodded at the two of them and wished them a pleasant day. Antonia and Johannes returned the greeting. They took a few steps away from the stand and smiled mischievously at each other.

'You really learn new languages quickly when you live in another country,' said Antonia quietly, listening unobtrusively to the conversations around her. Most of them were about simple everyday things, no sign that anyone else had the plague.

'Yes, I've noticed that too,' Johannes replied. 'Come on, we still have to go to the small market. You know, the child who had a cold. This time we'll send the people out first, yes? The fact that they saw you doing most of the work attracted far too much attention.'

Antonia nodded and tried to look well-behaved and inconspicuous, but she had to concentrate hard not to jump around or look around too much. She had hardly seen Godric anymore, they only spoke to him in the evening, still in her disguise as a boy, which she shed as soon as she left the house.

*Your grandmother was burned, she thought, be careful. Think of Ava, what she told you. Maybe it even happened right here.*

She shuddered as she imagined a pyre being erected where a bread stand now sold its wares. She heard the sound of falling wood somewhere. She shook herself and continued on her way. Something was in the air. Maybe it was just the signs of a thunderstorm, but she had a feeling something was brewing.

'Excuse me?' a voice behind them asked.

Antonia and Johannes turned around. A woman was standing behind them, staring wide-eyed back and forth between them and curtsying. Antonia looked at her kindly.

*'That's how I would have been too,' she thought, 'I wouldn't even have dared to talk to strangers. But now I have to be afraid that too many people know me.'*

Johannes nudged her, causing her to startle out of her thoughts and make an awkward curtsy. The woman hid her hands behind her back.

'My husband is sick,' she said. "We heard you might be able to help. My neighbour two streets over told us about you."

Johannes nodded, and Antonia held back to maintain the appearance that Johannes was the Medicus and she was his assistant.

'Of course,' he said with difficulty in English, "We... we..."

'can help,' whispered Antonia when he got stuck for words. Johannes poked her in the side again, but finally continued.

'We can help. My... wife and I. Where?' he asked, gesturing wildly and nervously.

The woman gestured with an unobtrusive hand movement into an alleyway that looked unpleasantly familiar to Antonia.

'Further down this alley, then turn right and it's the third house on the right,' she said. 'Are you coming?'

She took a few steps in the direction of the houses and turned around with a questioning expression on her face. Johannes, who had only understood half of the directions, followed a little perplexed, and Antonia was forced to follow him. She tugged at his sleeve, but in the crush of people she couldn't hear him answer.

'Dear Sir?' came another, deeper voice from behind them. Antonia turned around first and received the stern gaze of an older man, who reminded her to look modestly at the ground. Johannes turned around in surprise.

'Yes, sir?' he asked.

The man cleared his throat. 'We've heard that you're selling remedies and healing, is that right?' he asked. "We need a registry of all the professions and their guild members in this neighbourhood, and since you're new here, you still have to do that. We need to know where you live, your name, and information about what exactly you do here."

'Please excuse me. What did you say?' Johannes asked with difficulty.

'Practices like yours are not common and must pass a more detailed examination,' the man said sternly, "especially women who help with it," he shot a stern look at Antonia, 'and there is a rumour

that she was in Petersiliengasse to give herbs to the widow Ermintrude. A book was involved. You are her husband? Can your wife read?’

Johannes swallowed nervously when he realised what the man had said.

‘Yes,’ he replied, glancing back and forth between Antonia and the man, “I’m her husband. I, er, read to her. And she just helps me, er...”

‘What’s the book?’ the man asked sharply.

The marketplace wasn’t very big, and by now most people had realised that an interesting conversation was taking place. The sun was shining directly over the man’s head and blinding Antonia. She squinted up in confusion, feeling the desire to hide from the sun – in her attic room, in the hold of a ship, or even just in the shade of an alley.

‘We have the book... er... it’s...’ Johannes tried to think of an excuse and to put it into words in the foreign language at the same time. However, he did not succeed. He just stuttered something and then remained silent, confused.

‘Your wife hangs around in strange places,’ a voice mocked from the crowd, “walking around in the alleys on weekdays in trousers and a shirt. And in front of the brothel, no less.”

A few indignant cries sounded from the crowd. Antonia strained to find the source of the noise, but couldn’t see who had said it.

‘Silence!’ the man thundered, silencing the crowd before turning to Antonia.

‘So,’ he said softly, ‘you tell me what kind of book it was, little one.’

Antonia suppressed the urge to kick him and then run away. Instead, she stared him in the eye.

‘The book was a sacred work of my grandparents,’ she said, ‘with prayers and recipes for healing people. My husband uses the knowledge from it to care for the sick, sir.’

‘As if saints were lurking in the alleys in front of the fun houses!’ someone laughed. “A holy recipe for cutting off your hair and playing at being a boy?” ‘She’s a liar, show the book, girl! And take off your cap!’

The shouts spread through the crowd and the people pushed even closer. Antonia pressed herself close to Johannes and looked for an escape route. She had imagined a thousand times where they could climb onto the grey roofs and where they could hide until someone walked by. But she didn’t know where.

‘Give me the book!’ the man said, but his voice was lost in the shouting. A hand reached out from the crowd and pulled Antonia’s bonnet off her head. Her hair fell out from under it, but it was less than any woman in the marketplace had.

‘A boy in a dress?’ someone asked, confused. Antonia didn’t wait for anyone to explain. She grabbed Johannes, who had been gripping her shoulder harder and harder in the last few seconds, and pushed them both into the nearest alley. Some hand grabbed her arm and pulled her back, where the crowd looked around in confusion to see where to look for the girl.

‘Antonia, come on!’ Johannes called, grabbing her by the other arm and yanking her away again. Someone grabbed his waistcoat, but he took it off and ran after his girlfriend. With racing thoughts, Antonia grabbed an iron hook in the wall and pulled herself up to an intermediate roof that opened up between two tall houses. Johannes jumped after her with difficulty and they lay flat on the roof. The breath swirled up the earth on the roof and Antonia could feel Johannes’s heart beating, as

fast as her own. She felt like crying. But then they would have been heard, and the shouts from the alley were already much too close.

‘Johannes!’ she whispered, “I...”

Johannes grabbed her and gently pushed her down.

‘We’ll manage it,’ he said soothingly, although he was shaking himself, ‘We’ll wait until it gets dark. Then we’ll escape again.’

‘But it’ll go on and on!’ she protested quietly, although she tried to be still.

‘I know,’ John said softly, “but I’ll always come with you. Remember that. And maybe we’ll find help somewhere.”

Antonia nodded. She didn’t feel much safer, but a pleasant calm had settled inside her. It was too late to turn back, too late to just be a good girl and let herself be tamed. She had chosen her path now, and she would defend herself.

‘We have to stop by Godric’s,’ she whispered, “I need my bow.”

Johannes looked at her uneasily, then nodded. Someone called out something down in the alley.

‘When it’s dark. Quiet!’ he whispered, putting a finger to his lips.

Godric opened his eyes. The fire in the fireplace was still glowing, as he realised with relief. He quickly added some spruce wood to the embers and then leaned up to look out the window. He had forgotten what time it was during his afternoon nap.

Almost at the same time that he opened the upper door, the church bells sounded. The tones fell like huge raindrops on the city, light and dark, at different volumes, flowing over roofs and alleys to his ears.

Godric counted the chimes and looked at the grey sky. It was dark and criss-crossed by a network of even blacker clouds. The sun seemed to have already set, but he couldn’t see that clearly. A few lamps were lit behind the shutters.

Godric paused briefly when he heard a faint clanking sound. Strangely, it seemed to come not from the alley, but from the air above him. He looked up and couldn’t help but utter a surprised sound when first one and then a second figure leaped over the alley as if they intended to join the birds that sometimes perched on the rooftops. They were only there for a few seconds, then the view of the sky was clear again.

Godric stared intently at the sky and listened. The one shadow reappeared, sank down and stopped at the height of his skylight. Seemingly unafraid of the height, it crept through the open window casement, reappeared a moment later and climbed back onto the roof. A quiet voice spoke before silence set in. Even the chimes of the clock faded away, taking the strange events with them. The old man wondered if he had dozed off or dreamt. He leaned on the door that blocked the way to the alley and stared thoughtfully at the opposite house wall.

He had noticed it all day long. Some days it was louder than usual, but today he recognised an old crackle that frightened him a little. It was a chant that sounded like hatred, fear and the urge to destroy something - the same music he had heard years ago. A smoldering ember crackled in the city, waiting to break out. And apart from that, he had forgotten to count the chimes and still didn’t know what time it was.

A flickering light appeared at the corner of the alley and grew larger and brighter as someone approached. Godric recognised one of them as a city guard, and the other as a woman who looked vaguely familiar – presumably one of his many neighbours.

‘Good evening,’ he greeted them as they passed, and nodded at them with interest. To his surprise, the two stopped right in front of his door.

‘Mr Godric Fischer,’ the guard said, “is this the right house?”

The woman nodded. “Yes, it is. Do you want me to help you, or should I go?”

‘Go home,’ the guard said curtly. The woman walked away, but stopped a few steps away, curious.

‘I demand to be let in,’ the guard said.

Godric looked at his counterpart thoughtfully. He took his time with his answer, scratching his beard and then his head.

‘I see,’ he finally said, “Why is that?” The guard sighed. ‘We are looking for a married couple whose wife is a witch. They are said to have found shelter here.’

‘Didn’t you pick them up ten years ago?’ Godric asked. “They didn’t come back, so you’ll have to check the cemetery, kind sir.”

‘This isn’t about the old widow,’ the guard said sharply. ‘It’s about the guests you’ve been hosting here in the last few weeks. And I demand to be let in to arrest them.’

Godric shifted his weight to the other leg.

‘I’m afraid I don’t have any more witches in store,’ he said regretfully, “Everyone has at most one of them in their life. Truly unfortunate, if you ask me.”

‘Watch your tongue, old man!’ growled the guard. Godric yawned.

‘You don’t remember my name, Alfric?’ he asked reproachfully. ‘But I’m the one of us who should forget things! I remember you quite well, you were the boy she helped to give birth to, the one you call a witch. The mother almost died, well. But she’s still alive. Is she all right?’

Alfric’s expression tightened a little, then he put on a self-confident expression again.

‘I have orders to search this house!’ he said. ‘Treat the guard with respect! Let me in and show me the guests staying with you. Especially the woman!’

‘You seem to be very interested in women all of a sudden,’ said Godric, ‘But I don’t have any women hidden in my house. Whoever you’re looking for, you won’t find her here. Now tell me, Alfric. Why are you looking at me? Don’t you think it should be shared out more fairly, which people you take friends from? Not always the same old men.’

Alfric’s feigned composure finally broke down.

‘Please let me in, Godric,’ he said earnestly. ‘It is rumoured that the two we are looking for have found shelter here. And it is about a book with supposed remedies written by their grandparents. I want to make sure you don’t get punished, but I need to search the house.’

Godric looked at him, a little tired.

‘I have two ship’s boys staying with me,’ he said at last. ‘Two sailors from far away. Quite young. I’m afraid they’re not here right now, and I don’t think sailors burn so well, so I’d try another address. I can’t do anything with books, I can’t read. For that, I recommend the church. Perhaps you should search that for heretics as well.”



Alfric looked almost desperate by now. He scratched his helmet with his halberd and then scratched his finger under it, glancing sheepishly at the woman, presumably for fear of losing respect.

'I have the order!' He said almost pleadingly. 'People scream for witches when they find them. If I go in now and don't find anything, then it's done. And my mother is fine, thank you.'

'I'm glad the work wasn't in vain,' said Godric. 'Yes, people are screaming, I hear that. Screaming for help and throwing stones behind the help. But the guard, he's just doing his job, right? It's not their job to think for themselves about what is good or wrong.'

But looking at the young guard's desperate face, Godric finally decided to show mercy.

'Well, come on in,' he grumbled, opening the gate, 'But don't break anything. The guest rooms are up in the attic.'

With a face relieved of a thousand worries, Alfric entered the hallway and made his way up the stairs as quickly as possible. His armour clanked as he struggled to push his bulky body through the narrow staircase. Godric watched him go, lost in his own speculations, then finally followed him up with difficulty.

The room was empty. Not a single thing that the guests had brought with them could be found. The beds had been made and smoothed, the sheets that had been leaning against the wall had disappeared. Even the book that had been kept in this house for ten years was gone. Alfric looked around uncertainly before turning around again, but Godric stayed upstairs for a moment and looked at the windowsill. There, in the light of the candles, was a faint footprint, of a single, naked foot.

Godric leaned out of the window and let his gaze glide over the city.

'Run, little one,' he murmured softly, 'run as far as you can.'

## Chapter 8

Johannes was panting under the weight of his things. London was bigger than Lübeck, much bigger, and they had to make many detours to avoid too-wide alleys, to evade patrols or to find the right way again. He had been panting for at least an hour behind Antonia, who, despite her dress, seemed to be faster than him. Her shadow, with the bow over her back, moved deftly over the roofs, agile like a cat on the hunt. Despite his admiration, Johannes could no longer resist groaning.

'Antonia! Let's stop,' he gasped. The shadow in front of him stopped on a roof ridge, turned around to him and finally sank to the ground. Johannes fell to his knees, panting, and slowly caught his breath.

'We shouldn't stay in one place for too long,' his friend urged. 'The guards are still looking for us. When it gets light, the whole city will be on the lookout again. And we still don't know which boat we can use!'

'That's why we shouldn't kill ourselves on the way by falling into an alley or something like that,' Johannes replied, sitting up again.

Voices were heard in the alley below them for a moment, then it was quiet again. The city around them seemed like a cemetery, with stones rising out of the fog. It was a world of its own, the world above the alleys and most people. From this world below them, only a flickering torchlight sometimes shone up or the glow of a candle caught in the drops that filled the air.

'Do you know how we're going to get to the quay?' asked Johannes, scanning the nearest alleys for a crossing. They were all too wide for him to dare to jump in the dark. Antonia was squatting on the edge, peering down. A torch was hanging in the wall just below them, but otherwise the alley was empty and dark.

'It's not much further,' she said. 'A few alleys ahead, there should be the river. But I don't know exactly how far we are from the quay. And we have to go down this alley. There's an extension to the stable at the house at the back, maybe we can climb down into the backyard.'

'How come you remember all this so well?' Johannes asked, confused. Antonia just grinned at him.

'I'm well prepared,' she said curtly. 'Can you keep walking?'

Johannes nodded. He had the feeling again of seeing a fire burning in Antonia's eyes that he hadn't seen before. For some reason, he felt safer. His girlfriend's determination was enough for both of them.

A few minutes later, they both fell like ripe fruit into a backyard and looked around for an exit. Quiet chattering came from the stable as they crept past the wooden gate. The chattering turned into a small shouting match when Antonia tripped over the hem of her dress and bumped into the door. She grabbed Johannes's arm in fright and froze for a moment, then pulled him towards the alley.

Johannes ran after her as fast as he could. It felt unsafe to walk on the cobblestones again, as if you were on a sheet of ice that was beginning to crack. Their feet echoed far too loudly through the alley, their breathing seemed no quieter than a storm raging through the city.

Antonia reached the alley first and looked into the face of a torchlight. Shadows moved behind the next corner of the house, enveloped in the orange glow of the fire, towards her. She didn't need to consult with Johannes; they ran in the opposite direction without hesitation and slipped into another side street.

'Who's there?' thundered a voice behind them. The clucking from the stable slowly died down again, but the sound of their footsteps was easy to follow. The footsteps behind them grew louder and faster, and their lead seemed to be diminishing.

'I can't find my way back to the roof!' Antonia exclaimed as she ran. They were still well ahead of their pursuers, but the dress was hindering her running. 'What should we do?'

Johannes shrugged, which was hardly noticeable in the running rhythm. 'Not yet to the quay!' He said hastily and turned around. At the end of the alley, a torchlight could be seen again, growing larger at an alarming rate.

'Do you have your bow?' Antonia whispered.

Johannes hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Like two sides of a mirror, the two turned around and drew their bows while the clatter of footsteps grew louder and finally a silhouette emerged, holding a torch in its hand.

'Who goes there!' the voice repeated, "If you are who we seek, follow us without resistance and God will prove your innocence. If you are someone else, call out your name and explain why you are running through the streets at this hour!"

The two teenagers remained silent in unison, and Antonia slowly drew an arrow from her quiver.

'Answer!' the voice said, and the figure took a few heavy steps in her direction.

'Halt!' Antonia said. Her voice was not loud, but it vibrated with tension, making it sound like a bugle through the alley. 'We won't answer. Don't come any closer.'

The footsteps faded away. 'What are you threatening us with, devil woman?' the pursuers asked mockingly.

'I have a drawn bow in my hand,' Antonia replied more calmly than Johannes had ever believed her capable of, 'and I can aim. There are two of us, so you can't catch us from the other direction either. Stop and let us go!'

More footsteps sounded behind the figure with the torch. 'What's going on, Georg?' someone else asked. 'Do you see ghosts?'

'I'm not quite sure,' the first figure growled. 'Apparently we've found them, but they're threatening us with a bow and arrow, wherever they got it from. Show yourselves!'

Antonia raised her bow and placed the arrow on the string. 'No,' she replied curtly.

'Show yourself, witch!' shouted the second, "We come with iron, so don't even try any spells! May the fire take you!"

Antonia was silent for a while and exchanged glances with Johannes. Her friend just stood there, at a loss, the bow in his hand, looking at her somewhat uncertainly.

'You can't hurt me,' Antonia spoke quietly into the alley, slowly and clearly, 'Some are burned by fire, some are made even stronger by fire. The old widows you burn will keep coming back. They want to help people. You have created deadly witches yourselves, because we fight back when you hunt us.'

She heard the two men whispering softly and lowered her voice even further.

'I hereby curse you,' she said darkly. 'In the name of the fire that I have tamed, I curse you. The same flames that should consume me shall consume you and all those who work against us. Not in the name of the devil, but in the name of God, so that reason may finally prevail in this world.'

She felt her voice growing more and more angry and her hands trembled around the bowstring when she had finished speaking. But the two men didn't move anymore and stared at her fearfully instead. One of them dropped the torch, which landed in a pile of boards at the edge of the alley.

She felt something gently tug at her sleeve. She turned to Johannes. Her friend smiled weakly, stared into her eyes for a moment and then moved his head in the direction of the next alley.

Antonia took a deep breath and allowed Johannes to pull her along. In the next alley, she put her arrow away again, but kept the bow in her hand. It remained quiet behind them until they stopped panting at some alley. Behind them, it remained ominously silent.

'And now what?' whispered Johannes. "There's still an alley to go before we reach the quay. Where should we hide?"

Antonia thoughtfully pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

'I don't know,' she said softly. 'I don't know where we should go. The only one I trust here is Jacob. And he won't let it happen again.'

'He will, for sure!' protested Johannes.

'Why should he?' asked Antonia wearily.

'It's much more important than last time!' said Johannes urgently. 'Last time you should have got married, this time it's a matter of life and death! You can make money now, just more carefully than we did here, so it can't bother your father as much!'

Antonia shook her head.

'I like Jakob, Hainar and the rest of the crew too much!' she whispered. "I can't drag them into this!"

Johannes sighed. "You should have realised by now," he said quietly. 'But people who like you usually don't mind being dragged into your problems.'

Antonia nodded, then wrinkled her nose.

'What is that?' she asked, looking up in confusion. The dark clouds, which had been reminiscent of smoke all day, were moving faster. The strong smell of smoke came from the alley they had just fled from.

'Did you really curse them?' Johannes asked, wide-eyed. 'How did you do that?'

Antonia grabbed him by the arm. 'The torch must have lit a fire,' she whispered, horrified. 'We have to get to the water! Quickly!'

The hammocks on the floe rocked gently back and forth. Strangely enough, the ship seemed to move more and more when it was in port. Arnold lay awake, sleepily observing the faces of his long-standing comrades when he realised that someone was missing.

Valentin was sitting on the railing like a cat when he stepped onto the deck. The young seaman had still not decided where he wanted to go – whether he wanted to stay in the city or continue travelling with the Scholle – even though they were supposed to leave the next morning and the ship was already loaded. At least the boy had a choice. Arnold sighed as he thought back to his own escape. More had happened than should have happened. Neither he nor Fabian liked to talk about it, though the sailors on the floe had nothing to fear—those who did their work were paid. The persecution only began on land.

He leaned against the railing, yawning, a few metres away from Valentin to make himself noticed. The boy jumped up from his half-asleep and stared at him in surprise, then his gaze wandered back to the city.

'What are you thinking about?' Arnold asked kindly, "The night is actually for sleeping."

Valentin nodded and stared as if spellbound at an invisible point on the quay. "Just so," he claimed, 'Do you know your way around Lübeck?'

Arnold shook his head. 'No,' he laughed, 'We come from much further away. We had almost forgotten that. But Emil and Johannes, they certainly knew their way around. Just like Jacob. Rüdiger maybe too, but he was from Hamburg, if I remember correctly.'

'So you didn't know Emil and Johannes before,' Valentin stated, 'Have you seen Jacob before?'

Arnold frowned slightly, surprised by such precise questions.

'Yes, of course,' he said, "We've been working on the floe for years. He was often at the quay with his father. Nice family, unfortunately without a mother. He had two younger sisters, or cousins. But what's on your mind when you ask such a question?"

Valentin shrugged.

'I'm not sure,' he said after a long pause. "You won't say anything, will you? I'm sure Thomas would laugh about it, Rüdiger is gone, and the others would just tell me to stop thinking."

'I'll keep your secret,' Arnold promised solemnly.

Valentin took a deep breath. 'I think Emil is a girl,' he blurted out. 'I think Jakob knows him or her and is helping him escape. I heard Jakob call Emil Antonia. And you've heard the rumours that a woman in town is healing plague victims? A few days ago, Emil...'

Valentin hesitated, while Arnold stared at him irritated, and turned his gaze back to the quay.

'Hm,' Arnold said quietly after a while, 'I've wondered from time to time... That sounds plausible, of course. It's strange for a woman to flee on a ship. If I hadn't seen so much already, I would consider it indecent, but you lose your decency at sea anyway. You're afraid that the others will think your thoughts are stupid?'

It was unusual for Valentin to express so much of his thoughts. This confused Arnold even more than the news. He was not particularly disturbed by the young sailor's speculation. He had suspected himself time and again that something was wrong with Emil, but what the merchant said was an order.

He followed Valentin's gaze to the shore and paused. The city was brighter than it should be.

'Is that a fire?' he murmured in wonder. "We should wake the others, it could spread to the shore."

'There are people,' said Valentin.

'Could well be, probably refugees. Is there something else?' Arnold replied when Valentin didn't move. The boy seemed to be thinking feverishly and then slid back onto the deck.

'They're Johannes and... Emil,' he said, more determined than ever, 'and I think they're being followed. Because of the rumours that have been spread about them. I'm going to help them.'

Arnold looked at Valentin thoughtfully. He didn't exactly ooze fighting spirit, but for the first time on the journey, Arnold had the feeling that the boy knew what he wanted. And it was important to make such decisions - it had saved him and Fabian's lives several times.

'Come on,' he said, 'Then go. I'll wake the others. But be careful that no one catches you!'

Valentin didn't even have time to nod, but climbed over the railing and jumped onto the quay wall.

The quay lay open before them, and no one stood between the two fugitives and the water. Nevertheless, both stopped abruptly before crossing the invisible boundary between the alleys and the quay. The harbour jetty was lit by torches, and there was nowhere to hide. Antonia and Johannes couldn't see into the other alleys that led to the square in front of them, but it was quite possible that watchful eyes were also sweeping the square from there.

'We're going to the clod now, right?' Johannes asked quietly, turning around nervously. The smoke that had followed them a few alleys hadn't spread any further. Maybe a haystack had caught fire and already gone out. Or the fire was just spreading in a different direction.

'Yes, we can't go anywhere else,' said Antonia, flinching her eyes back and forth to spot any guards in time.

A little way upriver, a small shadow moved, jumped from one of the ships and ran across the pavement towards them. Antonia grabbed Johannes and pushed them both against the wall of the nearest house. Johannes peered over her shoulder and pushed himself in front of her.

'Whoever it is has already seen us!' he whispered. "Then he'd better see me than you, you look more suspicious!"

Antonia nodded and clung desperately to the bow she had hidden behind her back. The figure approached with fumbling steps and waved to them. Not quite sure whether she should be relieved, she recognised Valentin, who was pressing himself against the wall under Johannes' suspicious gaze. He looked at them both for a moment, at Antonia a little longer, then smiled.

'Do you have to run away?' he asked.

The two teenagers looked at each other somewhat confused, then Antonia nodded.

'Yes,' she said, "Valentin, I have to admit, I'm actually-"

'I know,' said Valentin, grinning, 'I was listening to you the whole time. You could have talked less on deck. And you're also the person who healed the people, aren't you?'

Antonia nodded, Johannes still suspicious of her.

'We're wanted by the city guard,' she said quickly. "Someone recognised me as the girl in disguise earlier... then they started shouting and chasing us. That was at noon. We almost got caught just now."

'Where did the fire come from?' asked Valentin anxiously.

'Fire? It hasn't gone out yet?' Johannes cast a worried glance at the alleys behind them, "A guard was frightened and threw away his torch."

'We have to get out of this city!' Antonia urged, 'Valentin, do you know if the people from the floe will help us? The guards could be back any minute and tow us away. I threatened them, so now they definitely think I'm a witch.'

'I think it's quite possible,' replied Valentin, 'Arnold also knows, he's waking the others up right now. I want to help you. Is there any way we can distract the guards?'

'What could be more important to them than the witch hunt?' asked Antonia.

Johannes, Valentin and Antonia looked at each other as the smell of smoke filled their nostrils. For a moment, they could all read each other's minds.

'Fire,' said Antonia.

Valentin merely nodded as if it had been an order. 'I'll go,' he said, taking a few steps into the alley before turning around again. 'Fabian told me that sometimes you have to do a lot of things to achieve your goal,' he said solemnly. 'Run to the clod, I'll take care of it.'

Johannes and Antonia stared at him in surprise. Johannes pointed to the clock tower, which rose up black out of the city and almost all of its hands pointed to the left.

'You'll be back here at ten o'clock, is that okay?' he asked.

Valentin nodded. 'Tell the others,' he called, and disappeared into the smoky alley. Antonia looked after him anxiously for a moment, until Johannes tugged at her sleeve again.

'We have to go on,' he said anxiously. 'I know he's up to something dangerous, but I think Valentin knows exactly what he's doing right now.'

'Why is he doing this?' asked Antonia, confused.

Johannes grinned. "Don't you get it? Some people still have some sense left, and some people just like you. Now come on!"

Antonia took a deep breath and nodded before she and Johannes entered the quay and ran towards the familiar silhouette of the ship.

Jakob yawned as he went to his window to take a look at the quay and the water. He already missed the sea voyage. Thoughts of the last few weeks kept him from sleeping. He tried hard to convince himself that he could simply run away from his duty, as Antonia had done, but something inside him prevented him from simply leaving everything and going travelling under the stars.

His gaze wandered to the floe, and he was torn from his thoughts. At this time of day everyone should have been asleep, but the dark deck was bustling with activity. Alert and sleepy, the sailors prepared for departure, while a few sailors jumped onto the quay and spoke to two small figures. He watched their faces in the light of the torches. When one of them turned towards the lights, so that she was illuminated by the torchlight, he recognised her as the slender figure of Antonia, with her bow over her back.

The young merchant sighed and smiled. He couldn't help but love Antonia for being so free and wild. She had fought much harder than he had for what she wanted, while he had never dared to contradict her father – and had instead helped her escape. With a sudden burst of energy that he hadn't felt in a while, he threw on his jacket and made his way to the ship.

When Antonia saw him, she looked frightened for a moment, then smiled and came to meet him.

'Jakob!' she said softly, hugging him, 'You're here – that's good. I... I found out that my grandmother was burned here as a witch – and I used her book to heal people. Now they are after me. We have to leave here, Johannes and I.'

Antonia's expression was desperate and worn out, but she didn't seem tired, much less helpless. Jacob grabbed her shoulders and sighed.

'You really have a talent for getting into trouble,' he said, "But I suppose you won't take that from anyone anyway."

'It's even more serious this time!' Antonia said urgently. 'And I don't know where else to turn for help. They'll kill me if they find me! That's what they do to witches, they burn them! Please, Jacob!'

Jakob tapped Antonia on the shoulder and blinked towards the city. A glow of light came from the alleys and cast its light up into the sky, where a thick, black plume of smoke stood, preventing the light from shining directly into the sky.

'Where is the fire coming from?' he asked, then he grabbed Antonia by the shoulder and gently pushed her in Hainar's direction. She was now wearing a dress, but her hair was still short and sticking up in all directions.

'Then we just have to convince Hainar,' he said. He realised that his little sister was looking at him.

'What?' he asked.

'Will you still be staying here then?' she asked.

'I don't have much choice,' he replied.

'You could come with us,' said his sister. "You want to be a sailor, don't you?"

Jakob looked a little indecisive between the dark steel yard and the floe, then shook his head.

'I want to, yes, but I can't,' he said sadly. "We need money, you know that."

'Father needs money,' replied Antonia. 'And we can get him that somehow. You'll only get sadder if you stay here. I can heal people now. Come with me, please! I want you to be able to do what you want too.'

Jakob smiled weakly. 'Not everyone can do that, Antonia. You're pretty good at it. But I'm not.'

Antonia just snorted. 'That's what your father told you. Selling remedies makes a lot of money, and we can send some of it to your father. And he still has his own business.'

Jakob finally pushed her over to the group of sailors.

'We'll see,' he said briefly. "First of all, we'll make sure you don't get burned. I don't care what you've done, so go and talk to Heinar and try to explain it to him."

Antonia wanted to say something else, but Jakob motioned for her to be quiet and stood next to Thomas, Hainar and Arnold, who were standing side by side on the quay.

Heinar looked at Antonia and Johannes with predatory eyes. He looked as if his eyes would burst into flames at any moment, while Thomas and Arnold looked solemn.

'I'm not going to help a woman who has been dressing as a boy for weeks and is now being called a heretic escape from the city with my ship!' he raged, 'I've been working for your father for years, but I knew what would happen if he didn't tame you!'

'Please, I haven't done anything to anyone!' Antonia begged, turning nervously to the alleys again and again, 'And you didn't have anything against me as Emil either. We are the same sailors who have been working faithfully by your side for the last few weeks, remember?'

'That's different!' Heinar had been grumbling for minutes, and he probably wouldn't stop anytime soon, "Women on board are bad luck!"

'I can vouch for her!' Johannes objected, 'She really only healed people with herbs, there were no spells. She did it to protect herself!'

'I'm asking you too, Heinar,' said Jacob, "You've known us since we were little children. Please don't abandon us now."

Heinar looked at Jacob with a piercing gaze. 'With all due respect, Mr Kaufmann, this is going too far. I don't help refugees and heretics.'

Arnold cleared his throat unobtrusively in the background. 'I'm afraid I have to interject,' he said softly. Heinar shot him a look that made him respectfully take a step back, and turned back to the conversation.

'Under no circumstances,' he said, "When I speak of loyal seafarers, I speak of people who are honest with me."

Thomas, who had been standing there silently, cleared his throat.

'I know of a story,' he began, and seemed to reformulate his statement when Heinar gave him one of his looks.

'Your summary is that everyone makes mistakes,' Thomas summarised briefly, "And you know that, Heinar. I also think that a little help would be appropriate. After all, Emil travelled with us and did really not do badly, a few stories here will certainly come out of that."

'No,' Heinar growled, 'Under no circumstances.'

'And you still owe me something,' Thomas added.



There was a moment of silence. Muffled orders from Daniel drifted over from the deck of the floe, and screams sounded from the direction of the fire.

'Are you saying you're claiming your debt?' Heinar growled without looking at Thomas.

Thomas nodded. 'Yes, that's what I meant. I'm sure everyone here has heard of this before and will be my witnesses. I'm claiming my debt.'

Heiner's gaze wandered to Antonia again. 'Are you a witch?' He growled.

Antonia held his gaze with difficulty. 'If someone is a witch who helps people and fights back when you try to kill them,' she replied, 'then yes. But then I don't know why you should hunt witches.'

Heinar's expression softened a little. He turned to his ship.

'Prepare to cast off!' he shouted to Daniel, "We're leaving the city before midnight!"

Johannes glanced nervously at the tower clock. The discussion had cost them valuable time.

'Where is Valentin?' he asked.

'Where is the boy anyway?' Thomas asked.

'He wanted to use the fire to distract the guards,' Antonia said quietly. "He obviously managed that. But he wanted to be back by ten."

Thomas glanced at the tower clock, whose hands were now well past ten, then looked anxiously into the alleys. Jakob tapped Antonia on the shoulder.

'Are you ready to fight?' he asked quietly.

'Why?' Antonia asked.

'We've decided to help you, but that won't save you. It takes time to cast off. And the first guards are up ahead,' said Jakob, pointing to the alleys that were not yet illuminated by the firelight.

Behind them, Fabian jumped off the ship and joined his brother.

'I heard we're fleeing?' he said. 'Again?'

Arnold nodded, glancing sideways at Antonia. 'Yes. But this time, it's not just us.'

Antonia lifted her bow again and took an arrow from the quiver, while Johannes strung his.

'Very well,' Fabian said, nodding to the two young people as the captain withdrew to the ship, 'Then show how strong your will to survive is – they will not stop us from escaping. They never have.'

With a final crash, a few more planks fell onto the bridge of fire that Valentin had piled up in an alley. It was incredibly hot. The burning warehouse was only a few metres away from him. The stable in the alley opposite had also started to catch fire, and the light blinded his eyes. Nevertheless, he stopped and waited until the flames had spread further through the alley, then he put his hands over his mouth and screamed.

'Fire!' he shouted, "Fire!"

He had quickly learned the language of London. And it was a simple word, sharp and spreading panic. He heard the first shutters rattling and the first voices picking up his words.

'Fire!' came from the houses, from the alleys, and the call spread to streets far away. Triumphant, Valentin watched as the fire bridge burst into flames and cast a bright glow into the alleys. He coughed as people streamed out of the houses, looked at the flames in horror, and ran in all

directions. Amidst the chaos and the screams, the bells suddenly began to ring, picking up the human call.

Sweating, Valentin looked at the light and turned around to make his escape as well. His work was done; the bells would alert the city guard to start extinguishing the fire.

He had barely finished his thought when there was a crash in the house next to him, which had just been seized by fire. Sparks flew out of the windows, then there was a second crash. A tongue of flame, larger than a full-grown oak, filled the house and seemed to want to push the walls apart. For a moment, the young sailor was blinded and stumbled back against the warm wall of the house as sparks, splinters of wood and ashes rained down on him. The next moment, the house was nothing but a ruin. *A powder magazine*, Valentin thought. Dazed, he turned to follow the alley, but it was filled with smoke. The second lane, on the sides of which there were already fires, seemed to be free, but then there was a crash and a few burning wooden boards blocked his way. The light surrounded him on all sides, the screams were far away.

*Fire!*, Valentin thought, but this time not triumphantly, but in panic.

Johannes drew his bow again and let the string whizz. The arrow he had shot pierced the shoulder of a guard who leaned against a wall, groaning and doubled over. Antonia ran a few metres towards the river, shot another arrow between the fighting sailor brothers and began to follow an alley, hoping to lure the guards away from the ship.

Johannes, Arnold and Fabian followed their example. The two brothers held back for a moment to let the guards run, and then blocked their way to the quay with swords.

Antonia paused for a moment to see if she could spot a way onto the roofs. When she found one, she waved to Johannes and pulled him up onto the roofs without further ado. A crossbow bolt pierced the wood of a window frame close to her head, and then they were back on the roofs with a view of the entire city – and the fire.

Antonia's mouth fell open for a moment. It was big, much bigger than she had imagined, and it was spreading even further. Johannes woke her from her thoughts as he jumped over the alley and climbed further downriver, towards the fire.

Thomas was still standing on the quay, looking anxiously down the shore. Hainar was now on the ship, and Jakob stood sleepily next to the old sailor, watching the battle and feeling a little envious of his sister, who had secretly become such a good archer. The two young people had already had their belongings brought onto the ship, and Jacob wondered if he should get his things too – just in case the fire spread to the steel yard.

'If the fire continues to spread like this, we'll have to leave earlier,' murmured Thomas, 'difficult with only half the crew. And they're fleeing in the direction of the fire.'

'Valentin hasn't reappeared, has he?' asked Jacob. Thomas shook his head; the young merchant had the impression that he looked rather pinched.

'If he doesn't do it in ten minutes, I'll go and see,' grumbled the old sailor, 'We can't let the youngest sacrifice themselves here.'

A few wafts of mist floated over the river and mingled with the smoke further up. The Thames seemed to be trying hard to start the morning peacefully as always, but the fire was already reflected on the surface – too bright a light for the night, and a ravenous light.

'Johannes!' Antonia shouted over the guards' bellowing before releasing another arrow, 'Stop! They're running away again!'

Johannes stopped and turned to her in the firelight. Arnold and Fabian, who had stayed down in the alley, were left alone by the guards. Fabian limped slightly, but Arnold supported him and brought him back to the quay.

The fire slowly spread to the quay a little further upriver. Antonia stopped and exchanged a worried glance with Johannes.

'I think we have to hurry, otherwise we won't make it,' she said, looking nervously up, 'why does it have to be dry today of all days?'

At that moment, something exploded on the riverbank between them and the quay. A house went up in flames, right on their way back to the ship. Antonia and Johannes stared at each other in horror, then, as if in a trance, looked at the burning houses around them, which lit up the sky orange. The night was clear, without fog – but the fire created enough haze.

Valentin stumbled blindly through the smoke, trying to breathe shallowly while ignoring the heat that hit him from all sides like invisible fists. He no longer knew where he was. Everything looked the same, embers on the walls and blackness in the air, a labyrinth of smoke and fire.

He must have been walking in circles for a while when he fell to his knees, coughing. There was a crackling and popping all around him, and not too far away he heard the roar of the fire front and some voice shouting something. It was his name. He tried to focus, but he heard it again.

Carefully, he raised himself from the burning ground and tried to walk. His legs trembled, but they still carried him. He ignored the heat and the glaring light and just kept walking, in the direction from which he had heard the voice.

After a while, he managed to find his stride again. He couldn't organise his thoughts clearly anymore—just when he had just started to trust them—but eventually he stumbled out onto a place where a burnt-out ruin stood, its remains still smouldering.

Two hands grabbed him from behind by the shoulders.

'There you are, you good-for-nothing!' Thomas shouted and turned him around to look at him, 'You're already half an hour late!'

Valentin could only manage a gasp. They were still standing in the middle of the fire and he had completely lost his bearings.

'No more jokes,' Thomas grumbled and pushed him forward, 'It's going to get even hotter, we have to go through the house over there. Nothing is burning there anymore, but it's still glowing. Behind it is a clear path down to the water. Now move.'

Some part of Valentin's mind wondered why Thomas was looking for him in the middle of the fire, the rest concentrated on following his instructions. The air in the small square was clearer than before, and it helped him to think again. He nodded and took a few steps forward. A wave of heat hit him from the house and made him stagger. He hesitated.

'Keep going!' Thomas shouted, and Valentin obeyed without resistance. Something inside him was more afraid of Thomas than the fire. He narrowed his eyes and felt his way through the mixture of glowing wood and black shadows, which were less hot than the rest.

Something crashed behind him. He turned around and saw Thomas pushing a beam between himself and the ceiling, which was threatening to collapse.

'Go on!' the old sailor shouted, "I'll keep the way clear!" Something collapsed on the upper floors, but Thomas hadn't spent his lifetime at sea to break down because of it. Valentin stumbled the last few steps and escaped through two burnt-out beams into the alley, where a pleasant coolness spread. He stumbled against the wall and almost fell against it, then he pulled himself together and turned to the burnt-out house.

'Thomas!' he called, 'Are you coming?'

He peered through the boards, although the heat stung his face. His whole body felt like it was being eaten away.

Thomas supported the beam with difficulty and slowly pushed himself towards the alley. The beam weighed down on him with the weight of an entire house.

'Run ahead!' he shouted. Then the house collapsed.

It seemed almost like slow motion in front of Valentin's eyes. First, several of the main beams on the upper floor broke. They tore the vertical beams with them, some of them breaking through the boards on the upper floor. Then the stone walls gave way under the pressure and slowly tilted backwards.

The floor joists on the ground floor were the last to give way. Then everything turned into a smouldering heap, from which dust, sparks and shreds of ash swirled up into the sky like fireflies. The debris that resulted from it continued to burn as if nothing had happened, almost with satisfaction.

Valentin couldn't utter a sound, except for a soft gasp. For a moment he just stood there, trembling, unable to move, then he turned around and ran the last few metres down the alley, the soles of his feet aching, towards a shadow that jumped from the wall of the house.

'Valentin?' Antonia called out in surprise. 'What are you doing here? Never mind that, we have to get out of here now. Johannes?'

Johannes came out of the side street and stared at him with equal surprise.

'There you are!' he said. 'You've really tried hard, but I assume the powder stores have done their best too. They're all dead ends.'

Antonia supported Valentin, who apparently could no longer walk properly and was caught in a kind of shock. He felt as if his thoughts had been burnt. Everything seemed like a dream.

'Then we'll have to try climbing the roofs again,' Antonia said curtly. Johannes nodded and waved them into the lane, and Antonia pulled Valentin along behind her.

The lane ended at a stone house with many windows, but it seemed to have been abandoned, presumably as a result of the fire. Johannes climbed nimbly up the window frames, Antonia pushed Valentin in front of her, and he climbed onto the roof without really knowing what he was doing, the heat still in every pore of his body.

Antonia was the last to reach the roof. She was pulled up by Johannes, who had also taken Valentin. The two of them stood at the edge of the roof while Valentin remained on his knees.

The Thames lay before them. Behind them, the city glowed like a sea of heat and flames. They were exactly on the row of houses in between that had remained intact, a black stripe in the middle of the chaos. The river had begun to form morning fog, which snaked through the city like white snakes. The water was full of boats and people, who scooped water out of the river and passed it on in long lines to the alleys. A few drops fell on Antonia's nose and cooled their bodies somewhat.

'I think we have to jump,' said Antonia, when Valentin had finally sat up next to Johannes and the rain had started.

Johannes nodded, Valentin grabbed Johannes's arm without saying a word, and Antonia held on to Johannes's hand, then they pushed themselves off the edge of the roof. Antonia felt the wind of free fall on her skin and in every part of her body, and Johannes's hand clinging to hers. She gripped it tighter and narrowed her eyes. For a brief moment she had the feeling of being absolutely free, of being able to fly forever on this wind, then she felt the impact on the water and the waves crashing over them.

Antonia came to the surface coughing. She blinked a few times and looked around dazedly. She had lost Johannes' hand on impact. She spotted him a little later, clinging to a wooden plank with Valentin.

'Where are we going now?' Valentin coughed, trying to make room for Antonia on the board. She didn't answer and shook the wet strands out of her face.

The mist enveloped the water surface, and rain fell gently into the waves. The water was cold and damp, relieving the heat and pain. A shadow moved close to them, large and dark, like the hull of a ship. In the next moment, a heavy rope fell down on them and splashed through the water surface next to them.

'Now hold on, you landlubbers!' a familiar voice shouted above them. Johannes grabbed the loop tied to the end of the rope and was about to grab Antonia, but she was already pulling herself up. Without further ado, Johannes grabbed Valentin and the rope lifted them slowly but surely out of the water.

The three young sailors landed dripping and coughing at Heinar's feet, who inspected them one by one and finally fixed his gaze on Valentin.

'Where is Thomas?' he asked. Valentin bowed his head.

'He's dead,' he said quietly, biting his lower lip. Heinar paused for a moment, then looked up again and stared thoughtfully out at the glowing city.

'Well. At least my debt is now paid,' he murmured to himself and stepped away from the others, towards the aft castle, where he stopped at the railing.

Jakob pulled Antonia to her feet and hugged her. Paul knelt down beside her and began to tend to Valentin's burns, while Johannes stood helplessly beside him. Fabian sat at the railing and frowned at the sky. The other sailors were manoeuvring the ship out of the city. Somewhere on the water, someone shouted something. The fire seemed to be slowly dying down; the rain and the city guards were doing their work. The drops fell on the faces of the crew and cooled them down, calming the fire that had spread within them.

At some point, Fabian put an arm around Valentin's shoulders in a gesture of comfort, while Antonia stepped to the railing with her brother and her friend and looked at the city that was slowly passing them by.

'We did it,' Johannes said, dazed, wiping the ashes from his face. Antonia nodded.

'You probably won't make it to Lübeck with us, will you?' Jakob asked. Antonia shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'I started to escape, so I have to finish it. I'll travel around some more. Maybe I can get my own ship somewhere, then I can heal people everywhere and quickly escape again if necessary. You still have the book, don't you?'

Jakob nodded and took a bundle out of his robe. 'Yes, here it is,' he said, and then he wanted to leave, but paused for a moment before he went. 'I've changed my mind,' he said, 'and I know what I'm going to do. I'll finish my training when this trip is over, but after that I'll hire a steward and travel by myself. Maybe then we'll see each other on the sea from time to time.'

Antonia smiled, then she was silent for a while, peacefully together with Johannes at the railing. She looked at the two injured and looked for the rest of the crew. There were fewer of them than on the outward journey, but enough to bring the floe back. Valentin limped slowly to the railing and leaned next to her.

'I didn't think Thomas liked me,' he said, concerned. Jakob put a hand on his shoulder, but said nothing.

'Do you think they'll keep following us?' Antonia asked quietly. Jakob shrugged wearily and adjusted his bow.

'I think in the confusion we've all created, no one has noticed which boat took us on board,' he said.

'And tomorrow we'll definitely be out on the open sea again,' added Johannes. He sighed and counted the arrows in Antonia's quiver. 'My goodness,' she heard him mutter, 'the new arrows are really urgently needed.'

Antonia just grinned and looked at the remains of the smoke cloud that was brewing into a familiar shape over the city.

'We'll see where we're going now,' she said meaningfully, 'But Jacob was right. The ships are the best way to be free. And we won't let ourselves be caught by any fire in the world.'

Johannes nodded and looked at the city wall that passed them by until the city slowly disappeared into the fog.

'That's right,' he said softly, crouching down next to her so that his hand just touched hers. Together they watched as the grey city disappeared into the fog, bidding them farewell until they too vanished into the haze of the water.

## **Epilogue**

*A grey city. A city criss-crossed by water that extends far into the landscape. It reflects the flames and the darkness above them. Fire blazes between the houses and smoke envelops me like a black cloak.*

*The fire is not only blazing here. I feel it burning in a thousand hearts. I am in a thousand bodies, in a thousand places. My spirit has grown lately. The ships have carried me far.*

*I don't know how I exist. I have been there before, and it will not be the last time either. But this time has come to an end. The fire is the sign for me to go. This time it has not devoured anyone who can do me harm. It is extinguished, tamed, and with it I also disappear.*

*I have no feelings with me. I have no soul, no spirit, no body. But I have thoughts - and these thoughts continue the story.*

*The Schollen ship and its companion continue their journey across the wild, wide sea. Brown hands run over the pages of a book. Bound in red leather, red like blood, red like fire. The girl*

*writes, and I write along with her. A story that someone might read one day, in a distant time. A story about a girl who tamed fire.*

*Slowly my power disappears from the last houses and alleys. I hover over the world in the last moments, without anything reflecting me. The water flows and people go about their business without seeing me. The whole world is in motion. Towers and ship masts rise proudly towards the sky, ignoring the ship of the clouds. Nowhere else could travelling be easier.*

*That is the last thought to reach the red book. The fire goes out and the story is gone, like the ships always are. But people had better watch out. Because the embers still exist and it is only a matter of time before the wind ignites them again.*

*I'll be back.*

## **Afterword**

...or is it? Nobody knows, because the plague is unpredictable and can strike again at any time, more violently than ever before. That is why it is important that medicine is not suppressed. If we set limits to science, we cannot develop further. If we continue our research, we may even find a cure for the black death! But these terrible witch hunts are killing many innocent women who could have contributed to science, like my poor grandmother.

-Antonia