

Step 1.

"- MATILDA!!! '

With a start, Matilda realises that the man at her feet is already dead. Has been for several minutes. And that his hands are covered in blood.

Around her, the galleon is already in the hands of the German corsairs led by Paul Beneke. Matilda gets up and gives a brief nod to the Old Man, an elderly man with sunburnt skin and a hard look in his eyes. She feels Paul behind her, staring at her with his usual disappointment.

Matilda pretended not to notice and ran to help her crew bring the St Thomas's loot back to the Peter von Rossel. She had already heard her comrades talking about loot for several days. '60,000 pounds!' they had been shouting all week. However, she notices that gold is not the only thing on board this galleon: a mysterious rectangular object covered with a veil is already being transported to the hold. She hadn't heard about it, but time is running out, she must finish boarding.

The Peter von Rossel continues on its way in the Baltic Sea, richer than it has ever been.

Matilda is resting. She is watching the water and its movements. The sun's rays dance on the surface, sparkling and gradually turning the water saffron. The sun sets in a spectacle of soft light that Matilda cannot help but admire.

'Matilda, it's your turn tonight.' She comes back to her senses when she hears the Old Man reminding her of her responsibilities as a sailor. It is up to her to stay awake tonight; she must make the usual rounds and keep an eye on the direction of the boat.

As night falls, she begins her inspection; on deck, nothing unusual. She then goes down into the aft hold and finds herself face to face with the treasure of the St Thomas. She freezes in front of so much wealth and wonders what is hidden behind the veil she recognises at the back of the hold. A thousand questions rush through her mind and curiosity drives her to find answers behind this heavy piece of cloth.

The beauty she then discovers leaves her in shock.

In front of her stands a triptych larger than most of the sailors on the galleon. In the centre, she notices a symmetry whose centre seems to be the figure of the god she has heard of at home. She recognises the twelve apostles as well as Mary around him. She sees angels carrying instruments, between heaven and the humanity lying at their feet. On the left panel, men seem to be ascending to heaven through a portal accompanied by a saint. On the right panel, the tortured bodies of the damned fall into hell, surrounded by demons. This part chills her to the bone, but she cannot help but be drawn to these faces twisted in pain.

It is the first time that Matilda has been confronted with such a representation, so beautiful and so violent, so complex and so clear, so divine and yet so close to her at the same time.

Stage 2.

The following night, she cannot sleep.

As soon as her eyelids close, Matilda sees once again the fantastic and haunting vision of the painting imprisoned in the hold. The almost uncontrollable urge to return to the work assails her and her whole body tenses. Her breathing is abrupt, her heart beats fast. Soon it will no longer be possible to ignore this almost physical call to be close to the painting, to brush her finger against it,

to breathe in its very special scent.

Matilda turns in her bunk and sighs anxiously. What she has discovered frightens her and fills her with joy at the same time. She is sure, at this precise moment, that this painting will change her life. The young woman feels ready.

She thinks of all the times she felt at home on the boat, for the first time in her life feeling that she had finally found her place, her purpose, that she was accepted. But she also recalls the other, darker moments. Those, like during the collision, when her mind goes blank, her body seems to act without her command and a violence overwhelms her. The urge to hit, again and again. By the age of 20, 10 men had already died under her blows. She tries to feel pity, sadness or guilt for these deaths she has caused. But all she feels is a deep-rooted disgust for herself, which has been going on for years. A disgust that is surely shared by the rest of the crew, although they pretend to put up with these excesses of violence.

The young woman falls asleep with the vision of the painting and of Paul giving her a disappointed look. You will never be like us, he seems to be saying. Deep down, she knows that she may never find her place.

Waking up at dawn, Matilda is surprised to feel so full of a new certainty: she will save the painting from Peter and his men, who are greedy for money and drink.

Stage 3.

All day long Matilda waits to be able to find the painting. She doesn't want to tell the crew what she saw for fear of having witnessed something forbidden, for fear of revealing to everyone the existence of this treasure among the others. Also for fear of meeting Paul's heavy and resentful gaze. The distance between her and the crew seems to have grown since their twilight encounter. As soon as the sun grazes the horizon, Matilda announces that she is volunteering for tonight's round. As she utters these words, her heart quickens and a shiver runs down her spine at the thought of seeing again what she already considers her painting.

The moon's rays gradually begin to caress the sails with an almost imperceptible song. After scrupulously checking that she is the only one awake, she rushes into the aft hold, lights a candle and unveils the triptych. The light of the candle reveals many colours, the flickering of the flame makes faces and expressions appear and disappear. The flames of the underworld devouring the bodies make the hairs on her arms stand on end. The crystal stairs give rise to hope within her. The spectacle seems to become clearer as the night goes on.

"Ah! I knew I would find you here!"

A voice pierces the silence that hung in the hold. Matilda jumps, turns around and sees the Old Man's face. In his gaze, there is no trace of surprise or discontent that she expected to see, but an unusual tenderness. Uncomfortable, even.

'Weren't you sleeping?' she asks him.

'No.' Le Vieux fell silent before replying fully.

'I... I saw a light in the aft hold. I was afraid she was on fire. I was looking for you to warn you but you were nowhere to be found, so...'

Matilda blames herself for worrying him. He asks her what she has been doing for so long locked

alone in this hold. After a few seconds of reflection, the young woman moves away from the painting and waves towards the object that now haunts her dreams. The Old Man's expression is indecipherable. He doesn't seem that surprised, Matilda thinks. She confides in him what she has been feeling for several days now. As she speaks, she realises how dear the fate of the painting is to her, and that the thought of seeing it arrive in Gdansk among pirates breaks her heart.

'I want to save that painting.' Her own voice when she expresses her decision for the first time seems foreign to her ears. Confident, determined. Serious.

The Old Man looks at her, perplexed. Then he sighs, looks at the painting and replies:

'Florence. That's its true destination.'

Matilda's eyes widen, and she realises that she herself had no idea where this masterpiece was supposed to go. Silly girl, she thinks, did you perhaps imagine keeping it in your bunk? She doesn't have time to wonder how the Old Man knows this, because he assures her that he will protect her in her decision. Tomorrow morning they will talk about it again, he tells her.

Matilda ends her night, anxious and distressed about the turn her life is taking.

The next day, Matilda prepares for the promised discussion. She had not slept a wink all night and her lips were parched with stress. On the bridge, she saw the Old Man. When she approached, he handed her a box of ropes and Matilda immediately began to tie them together, as a diversion. She was delighted to have found someone so experienced whom she could trust.

'Matilda, I have something to tell you. I thought about it a lot last night and I know how we're going to get the painting back to Florence. We'll stop in a few days to stock up on supplies and I know someone there.'

'How can we trust him?' The question comes out in a rush, and the Old Man looks annoyed. But Matilda holds his gaze.

"Oh. He's a long-time friend. Almost a brother. He'll take the painting and put it on a boat going to Florence. With us on board. We'll be waiting for you in the hold at night. You'll have to join us on his boat at midnight. You'll leave the port on the boat and join us in the hold. We'll take care of the rest. You wanted to travel a bit, didn't you?"

Stage 4.

The days pass by at an indefinable slowness for Matilda, who no longer even dares to go and look at the painting in the hold. What makes the wait seem endless is above all the lack of information given by the Old Man. Matilda knows nothing about the plan, from the date of the mysterious friend's appearance to his identity. She knows she should be grateful to be able to save the work, but the young woman would like to have more control over something that concerns her painting so closely. For no matter how much the Old Man may have seen it and no matter how much the painting may have real owners, for Matilda it belongs to her through an indescribable bond.

Finally, the day arrives. From the deck, the coasts of a green coastline can be seen. Upon waking, as if by premonition, Matilda wakes up anxious. The old man discreetly informs her that the meeting is scheduled for that very evening. All day long, Matilda tries to reassure herself. She should feel happy, relieved to finally save the painting. Yet, only a dull panic inhabits her limbs.

In the middle of the night, while everyone is asleep, a small sailing boat approaches the galleon and moors to it without a sound. A figure emerges and makes his way to the deck of the galleon. On the other side of the deck, Matilda, hidden behind the sails, observes this stranger who must

save her treasure. His gait is heavy, confident. When he disappears into the hold, Matilda deftly jumps into the smaller boat, almost falling into the water in the process. Her hands tremble as she grabs the mast to steady herself. She takes in her surroundings at a glance. There is barely enough room for two men to stand. How will they navigate with three of them, with a painting of significant size all the way to the shore? His question will remain unanswered.

On the galleon, the Old Man and the Friend join each other in the hold, under Paul's watchful eye. Silently, they cover the painting in a cloth, place the bundle in a wooden box which they nail shut. The Old Man smiles. He is already imagining the sale that will take place on land, and the weight of the gold coins in his palm. He hasn't even taken the time to look at the painting. On deck, he discreetly unties the rope that connects the sailboat to the galleon. His heart sank for a moment at the idea of abandoning Matilda there, but gold came first. She would be able to fend for herself. After all, a pirate does not prefer art to personal enrichment.

When Matilda heard the discreet *splash* of the rope falling into the water a few metres from the boat, she knew it was too late. No one would come, especially not with the painting, *her very own* painting. The boat was already drifting away from the only vessel the young woman had ever known. Too stunned by the turn of events, Matilda did not pay attention to the boarding orientation and bumped into the sail, which abruptly changed sides. The dull pain spreading over her skull is nothing like the pain that invades her when she thinks, in shock, of her recklessness, her naivety. If only she hadn't trusted the Old Man. The thought of his name is like an electric shock. She feels filled with uncontrollable hatred.

Automatically, she steers her boat as best she can in search of a lighthouse, some island, hoping not to come across anyone at sea. If someone were to cross her path, she would not be able to control herself. So much anger, so much disappointment, so much rage. She feels empty and full at the same time. With rage, she sends her meagre bundle containing her few belongings flying into the sea, and lets out a wild roar towards the starry sky. If only she had never raised the velvet curtain, if only she had not been in the hold that evening, she would not be in the middle of the Baltic Sea, freezing cold and with no idea where to go.

When the boat hits a pontoon after a terribly long and freezing night, Matilda jumps and almost falls into the water. Disorientated and weakened by a sleepless night, she squints because of the sun and tries to identify her surroundings. From the position of the sun in the sky, it must be between 6 and 7 in the morning. She has arrived in a narrow harbour, where a few weather-beaten boats and sailboats with roughly repaired sails are moored. There are few people on the pontoon, and dozens of seagulls take flight with a raucous cry as soon as she sets foot on land. It doesn't take her long to see what looks like the main street of a coastal village, typical of the region of her childhood. Poor, deserted by its inhabitants, with pavements wet with sea spray. With a cold smile, Matilda tells herself that, in the end, she won't be so bad off here.

Five months later.

Matilda knows, as she gets up that morning, that she will kill a man before sunset. The thought, comforting and dizzying, stays with her all morning. Her features remain tense as she begins her day as a waitress at the village inn, the only available work she found five months ago. A few days ago, she heard that a galleon was about to arrive, and since then, she has been convinced that it is the Peter von Rossel. Her hunches often prove to be right, and she recognises the approach of a fateful event in the trembling of her hands.

During her break, Matilda locks herself in her room and frantically searches for the small dagger that she has stowed away somewhere, a sort of knife with a thick handle that she found one day when she was cleaning the large room of the seedy inn. When she finally finds it, her fingers wrap around the handle as if they had always held it. She feels strangely calm and determined now that her weapon is ready. Matilda has never killed anyone in this way, but she is not afraid. She can barely remember the colours on the painting, the figures depicted on it, but she knows the pain she felt that evening, alone in her little abandoned boat. Like a haunting mantra, Matilda repeats that he deserves to die.

The young woman spends the evening watching for his arrival. Finally, at around 11pm, he pushes open the door of the inn, accompanied by other sailors whom the young woman does not recognise, with whom he laughs and noisily settles in. She discerns in his movements a laughable attempt to appear at ease, and in his new paleness the passage of time, unstoppable. The Old Man has never been able to quite fit in either, she realises. On dry land, his gait is clumsy and he seems out of step with the younger men around him, who cheerfully rebuff him.

When he approaches the table where she is pretending to dry the dishes, he does not recognise her. Then, as she slowly raises her head towards him, her eyes widen and a flash of understanding crosses her eyes. But it is too late, already Matilda vigorously grabs his sleeve, pulls him against the wall and without hesitation plunges her dagger into his chest, not too far from the heart but not directly on it. She wants him to have time to suffer a little.

With a gasp of pain mixed with an exclamation of surprise, the Old Man collapses to the ground, one hand on his already bloodied chest. Behind her, the men at the table fall silent, and some of them move towards her, ready to stop her. She ignores them, leans over the Old Man and plunges the dagger into his flesh, murmuring a few words as she does so, before being brutally seized by the sailors, who all alert the neighbourhood and try to stop the blood flowing from the Old Man's wound and staining the floor.

As she was forcibly taken outside, Matilda stared at the Old Man, whose eyes had become glassy. He was no longer breathing. She smiled and a weight seemed to lift from her shoulders.

Later, when the sailors of the Peter Von Rossel are questioned, none of them will be able to say why this pretty young woman with a respectable appearance suddenly threw herself at their captain and stabbed him to death.

Translated with DeepL.com (Pro version)